Isaac ASIMOV's SCIENCE FICTION MAGAZINE

$1.75 March 1983

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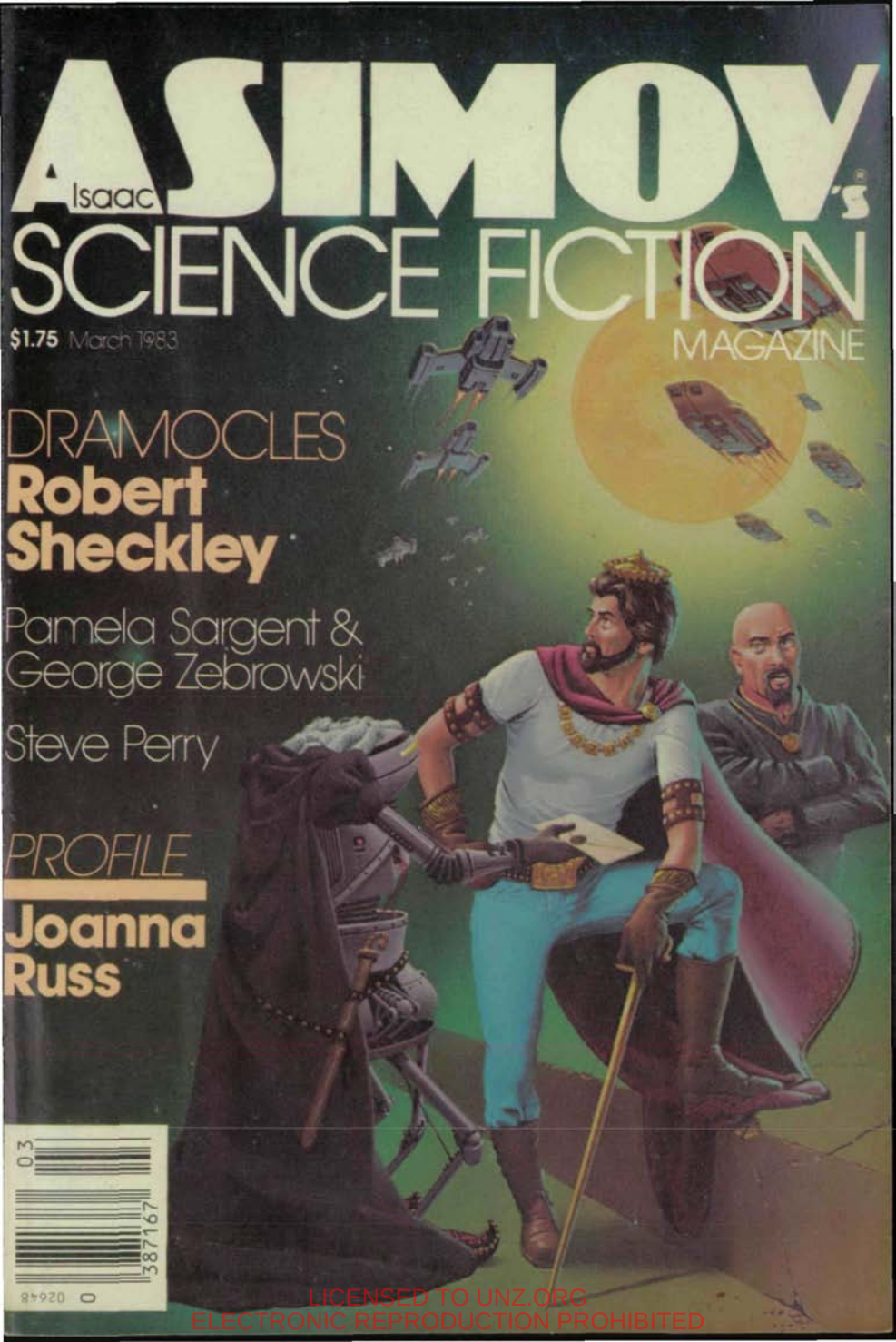

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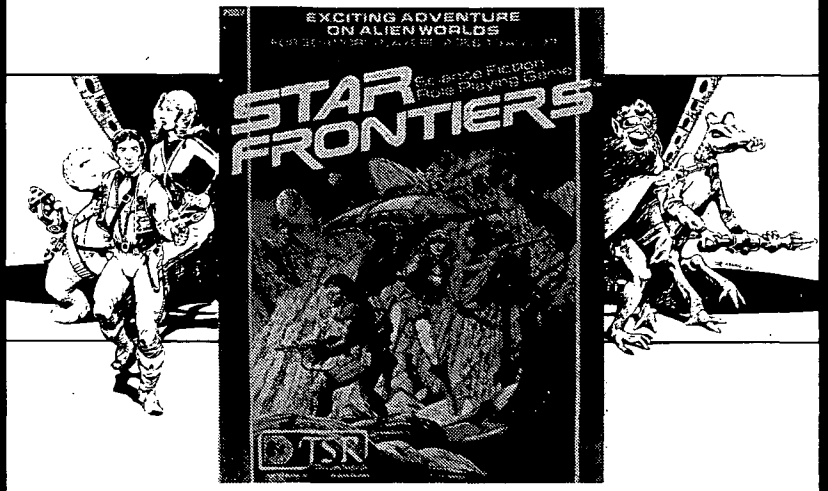

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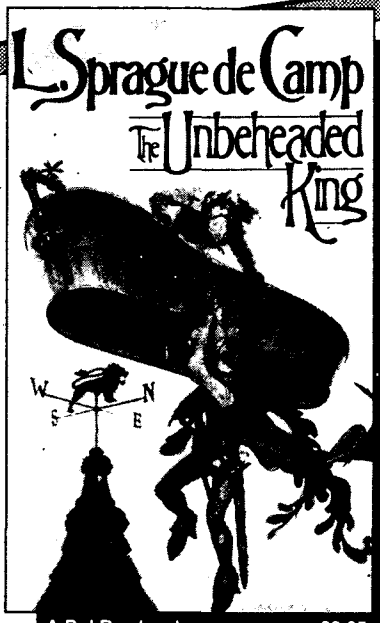

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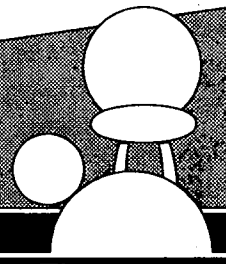
Unfortunately, he had not been able to bring his beloved wife, Queen Estrildis. So he and Karadur flew through the night air in a great copper bathtub powered by a demon under the wizard's control. Ahead of them lay Xylar City. There while the demon kept the bathtub hovering above the palace, Jorian could let down a rope and rescue Estrildis.

But Jorian learned you can never trust a demon...



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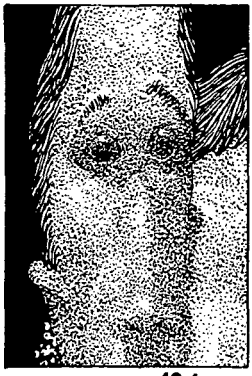

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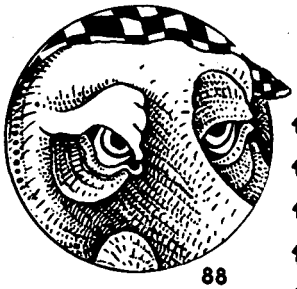

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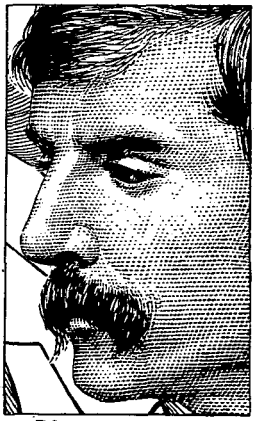

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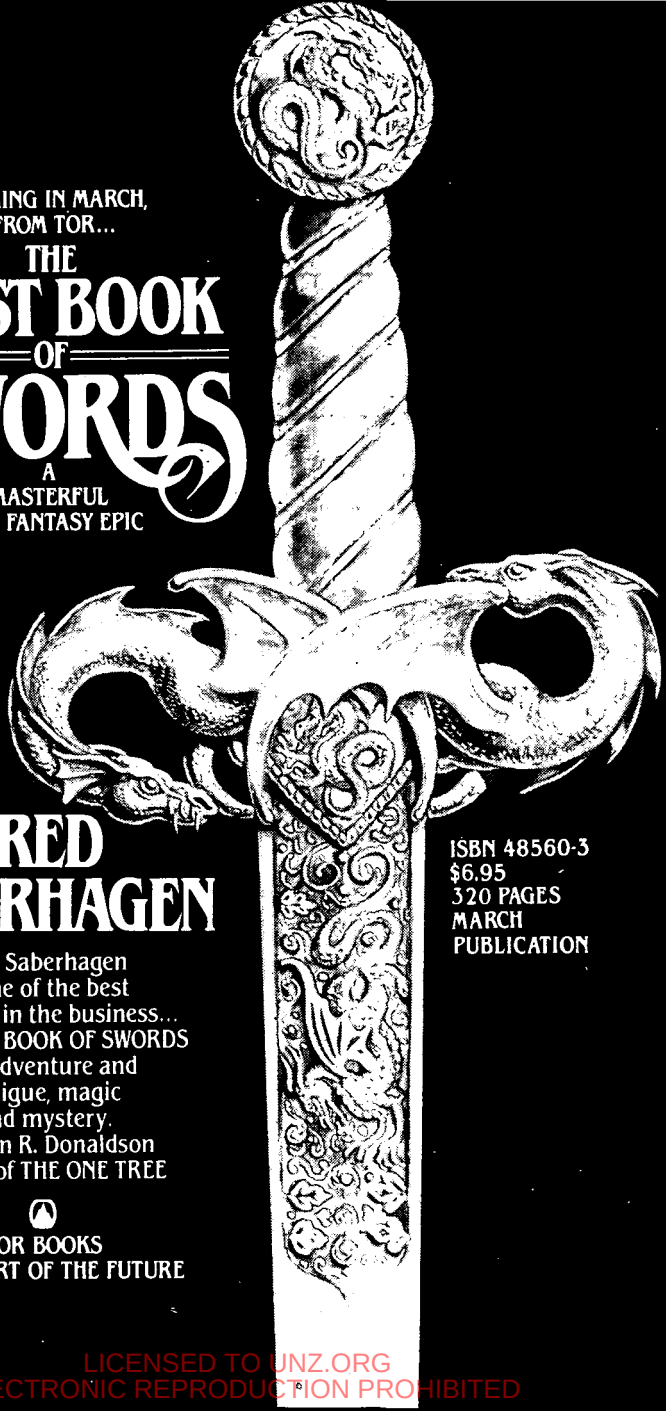

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EDITORIAL

by Isaac Asimov

THE ALL-HUMAN GALAXY

In 1928, "The Skylark of Space" by Edward E. Smith appeared in *Amazing Stories*, and was instantly recognized as an important milestone in science fiction.

Until then, stories involving space travel dealt almost exclusively with the Solar system. Trips to the Moon and to Mars were the staples. Visitors from other stellar systems may have been mentioned (as in the case of the visitor from Sirius in Voltaire's "Micromegas") but these were trivial instances.

Smith, however, introduced interstellar travel as a commonplace thing and placed his heroes and villains within a space-frame that included the entire Galaxy. It was the first time this had happened and the readers devoured it and demanded more. The "superscience story" became the hit of the decade. Smith held the lead in this respect for twenty years, although during the first half of his career, John W. Campbell was a close second.

Smith and Campbell viewed the Galaxy as including many, many intelligent species. Almost every planet possessed them and Smith, in particular, was most inventive in dreaming up unEarthly shapes and characteristics for his alien beings.

This "many-intelligence Galaxy" is not as prominent in science fiction as it once was, but you may find it in contemporary television. In *Star Trek* and its lesser imitations, it sometimes seemed as though a spaceship could not travel in any direction, at random, for a week, without coming across an intelligent species (usually inimical in one way or another.) The visual media are hampered in their ability to represent these aliens imaginatively, for somehow an actor usually exists under the makeup or plastic. The extraterrestrial creatures, therefore, if not human, were nevertheless clearly primate.

In this connection, though, the science fiction writer, Hal Clement, raised an interesting question, which I think of as "Clement's Paradox."

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The Universe has existed for perhaps 15 billion years, and if there are many civilizations that have risen here and there among its stars, these must have appeared at any time in the past 12 billion years (allowing 3 billion for the first to arise).

It should follow, therefore, that human explorers, when locating an extraterrestrial civilization, would be quite apt to find them anywhere from 1 to 12 billion years old in the vast majority of cases (assuming them to be very long-lived.) If they were not very long-lived, but only endured, say, a million years or less before coming to a natural, or a violent end, then almost all planets bearing such civilizations would show signs of the ruins of a long-dead one, or possibly a series of two or more sets of ruins.

To a lesser extent, in relatively young planetary systems, the civilization might not be ready to arise for anywhere from a million to a billion years.

The chance of encountering a civilization, then, that is at some level near our own would have to be very small.

And yet (and this is Clement's Paradox), science fiction writers consistently show alien civilizations to be fairly close in technological level to Earth's. They might be a little more primitive or a little more advanced, but considering the rate at which technology advances on Earth these days, it would seem that the aliens are not more than a few thousand years behind us at most, or a few hundred years ahead of us at best.

How enormous the odds are against that!

As far as I know, however, science fiction writers didn't worry about this. Certainly, I didn't.

Since I began publishing in 1939, when Edward E. Smith was at the very height of his success (though John Campbell had just retired to the job of editing *Astounding*), I naturally tried my hand at the "many-intelligence" Galaxy myself.

For instance, there was my eighth published story, "Homo Sol," which appeared in the September, 1940 *Astounding*. It dealt with a Galactic Empire consisting of the civilized beings from many, many planetary systems—each planetary system containing a different type of intelligent being. Each bore the name of the native star in the species name, so that there would be "Homo Arcturus," "Homo Canopus" and so on. The plot dealt with Earth's coming of technological age and the possible entry of Earthmen ("Homo Sol," you see) into the Empire.

And now there came a struggle between John Campbell and myself. John could not help but

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feel that people of northwest European descent (like himself) were in the forefront of human civilization and that all other people lagged behind. Expanding this view to a Galactic scale, he viewed Earthmen as the "northwest Europeans" of the Galaxy. He did not like to see Earthmen lose out to aliens, or to have Earthmen pictured as in any way inferior. Even if Earthmen were behind technologically, they should win anyway because they invariably were smarter, or braver, or had a superior sense of humor, or *something*.

I, however, was not of northwest European stock, and, as a matter of fact (this was 1940, remember, and the Nazis were in the process of wiping out the European Jews), I was no great admirer of them. I felt that Earthmen, if they symbolized these northwest Europeans according to the Campbellian outlook, might well prove inferior in many vital ways to other civilized races; that Earthmen might lose out to the aliens; that they might even *deserve* to lose out.

However, John Campbell won out. He was a charismatic and overwhelming person, and I was barely twenty years old, very much in awe of him, and very anxious to sell stories to him. —So I gave in, adjusted the story to suit his prejudices and

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have been ashamed of that ever since.

Nevertheless, I didn't plan to have that happen again, *ever.* I wrote a sequel to "Homo Sol," which I called "The Imaginary," in which I evaded the issue by having Earthmen not appear (and Campbell rejected it). I wrote another story in which Earthmen fought villainous extraterrestrial overlords, and felt that would be all right, for the overlords were transparent symbols of the Nazis (and, as it happened, Campbell rejected that, too).

I continued to want to write "superscience stories" *my* way, however, and continued to probe for strategies that would allow me to do so without encountering Campbellian resistance.

I arrived at the answer when I first thought of my story "Foundation." For it, I needed a Galactic Empire, as in "Homo Sol," and I wanted a free hand to have it develop as I wished. The answer, when it came to me, was so simple, I can only wonder why it took me so long to reach it. Instead of having an Empire with no human beings as in "The Imaginary," I would have an Empire with nothing but human beings. I would not even have robots in it.

Thus was born the "all-human Galaxy."

It worked remarkably well for me. Campbell never raised any objections; never suggested that I ought to insert a few alien races; never asked why they were missing. He threw himself into the spirit of the stories and accepted my Galactic Empire on my terms, and I never had to take up the problem of racial superiority/inferiority.

Nor did I spend time worrying about the rationale behind the all-human Galaxy myself. I had what I wanted, and I was satisfied.

I did not ask myself, for instance, why it was that human beings were the only intelligent species in the Galaxy. As it happens, it is possible that though planets are extremely numerous, relatively few are habitable; or that though many planets may be habitable, few may develop life; or that though many planets may be life-bearing, few indeed may develop intelligent life or civilizations. Nevertheless, I made no effort whatever to state any of this explicitly as explanation for what I was describing. It is only with my new novel *Foundation's Edge,* written forty years after the series had begun, that I have started to explore the rationale behind it.

Nor did I ask myself, at the start, if the idea were a novel one. Years later, I began to think that no one before myself had ever postulated an all-human Galaxy. It seems to have been my invention (though I stand ready to be corrected in

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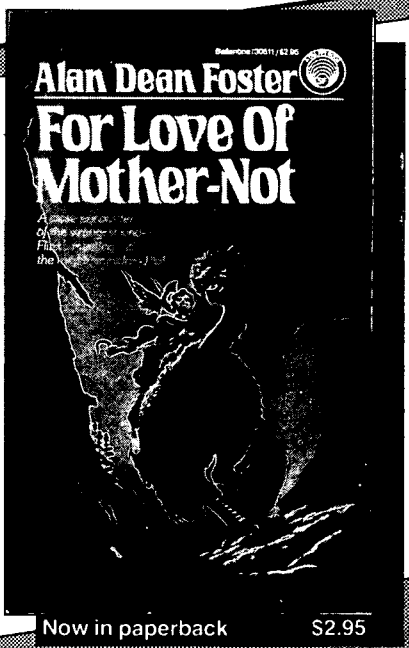

For Love Of Mother-Not

Alan Dean Foster

He was just a freckle-faced, redheaded kid with a compelling stare when Mother Mastiff first saw him on the auction block. She bought him, and became his only family—loving, feeding and teaching him. She even let him keep the deadly flying snake he called Pip.

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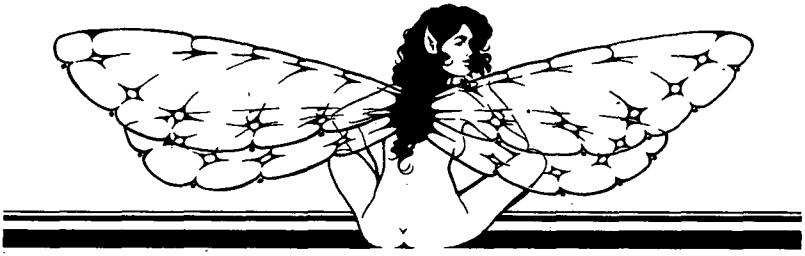
this by some SF-historian more knowledgeable than myself).

If I did indeed invent the concept, it is a useful one, quite apart from the role it played in the duel between Campbell and myself (a duel which Campbell never knew existed). By removing the alien element, the play and interplay of human beings can be followed on an enormous canvas. Writers can deal with human interactions (only) on different worlds and within different societies and it gives rise to interesting opportunities of all sorts.

And, what is more, the all-human Galaxy offers a way of getting around Clement's Paradox—perhaps the *only* way of doing so. ●



STAR-LIGHT

The light of stars comes faint but clear
From distances measured by the year.
The dinosaurs looked up to see
The same bright stars that look at me—
And when they did, did one star flare
As bright, let's say, as *that* star, there . . .

—Catherine Mintz

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ON BOOKS

by Baird Searles

Due to the rather eccentric schedule of this periodical (if you hadn't noticed, it's 13 issues a year, which results in issues dated in such manner as "mid-Dec.," to the despair of future collectors), I have an unduly close deadline this time. This cuts into writing time, and what is worse, *reading* time. Therefore, I'm sure my kindly editor will allow me to devote some space to answering a question in print which I am often asked face to face, one which seems to concern a great many readers (and, it might seem, some writers as well). And that is as to how I go about choosing the books with which I'm going to concern myself in this column.

I can only speak for myself, of course. I really have no idea how the others who hold down columns go about it. And I wish I could deny taking fabulous amounts of money or writers' toothsome bods to feature a book (presumably favorably). The reason I can't deny it is not because I've availed myself of these goodies, but because, regrettably, I've never been offered them. I say regrettably, of course, because I'd like the virtuous feeling of at least having the opportunity of saying no.

So much for the negative elements. What *does* influence me is in a way very simple, in a way not so. The simple answer is the desire for a balanced column; the not-so-simple part is just what makes up a balanced column. The single purpose of this monthly (?) piece is to inform you, the reader, of some of the interesting books that have appeared recently, and to do so knowledgeably and with some style and wit. But there are an awful lot of books published in our field in a single month, and there are an awful lot of you readers out there covering a wide spectrum of taste within that field.

So there's a balancing act—in several directions. For instance, this *is* titled *Isaac Asimov's SCIENCE FICTION Magazine,* so I almost always lead off with an SF work; on the other hand, fantasy is so popular and so many people read across the subgenres that a fan-

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tasy or two per column becomes part of the balance. Other variants are novels versus short-story collections which should be worked in periodically for the short-form addicts; and should I choose this first novel by a promising author against this twentieth novel by the old pro? And here we have a sequel (or #3 or #4 of a series) which, if the original work was mentioned, I really shouldn't take the space for, but shouldn't readers be alerted to the fact that the second maintains the quality (considering that there was some to begin with) or (rarest of events) is even better? And then there are the reprints—that classic, *Barsoom My Destination* by the celebrated master Poul Pohl has just been reprinted after languishing in the limbo of Out of Print for five years; that event should certainly be noted. Stir in every once in a while some reference books, other nonfiction books on SF and fantasy, and an art book or two.

All those potential factors and more go into the mix each month for a piece that will be as varied as possible, within that particular column and from issue to issue. I have the luck, due to my connection with The Science Fiction Shop, not to be dependent on the efficiency or good will of publishers to see the month's output of books. The poor things do their best, but the publicity departments of some major houses aren't awfully hip to the world of fantasy and SF—one of the major ones called the other day to hesitantly enquire as to whether I would consider reviewing fantasy (I'd been wondering why they never sent galleys of the myriad fantasies the company is noted for); and if it had been up to the publisher, I'd never have seen a copy of *Foundation's Edge* (not that I would review it anyway—for reasons of policy—but considering the amount of peripheral junk they lay on me, I would guess it was more carelessness than an intimate knowledge of this magazine's interior workings).

So, all in all, there is no easy answer as to what goes into the hopper here; every legitimate publication in the field is food for it, and what eventually gets written about depends entirely on what permutations emerge from the mass for that particular period. Perhaps, however, that will give an idea of how a book review column works, as opposed to the popular image of an arbitrary Jove randomly grabbing books to demolish or nominate for immortality.

Now on to this month's (?) slightly truncated mixture:

2010: Odyssey Two
By Arthur C. Clarke
Del Rey Books, $14.95

Having touched on the revo-

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lutionary concept above that critics are human, let me 'fess up right here that there is no way in the world I'm going to be able to be objective about a sequel to *2001: A Space Odyssey*. I was one of the lucky ones to see the film at one of the famous press screenings held the day before the film's opening —there had been *no* advance publicity on it, as opposed to today's overhype on every minor SF flick—and I went with absolutely no idea of what I was going to see—*none*. It turned out to be one of the major experiences of my life, the esthetics of which I'm not about to go into here, and which are probably uncommunicable anyhow, particularly to younger readers who have grown up with TV commercials featuring bran muffins rising over the horizon to the opening theme from *Also Sprach Zarathustra*. (It goes on . . . just yesterday I heard a grass-seed commercial—of all things—to the same music.)

But certainly part of that tremendous experience was the very ambiguity of the movie, and for that reason I hesitated before reading Arthur C. Clarke's novelization, though I'd been a longtime admirer of his work and was, God knows, grateful for the obvious and important part he had played in the creation of the film. There were simply certain things I did not want spelled out, and while I eventually *did* read the novel, and ended it with feelings more positive than negative, I still feel a sort of conflict between the media handlings—the film is so damned *filmic*, and so successful as such, that even a master such as Clarke can't hope to touch it in another form.

These feelings extend to *2010: Odyssey Two* and, as I noted, I must abandon any pretense to objectivity. In it, Clarke directly continues the story, primarily with Heywood Floyd joining a Russian expedition to Jupiter's system, specifically to board *Discovery* to find out the fate of its two (possibly) surviving crew members, i.e. Hal and Dave Bowman. That they do, and while by the time this sees print, this knowledge will undoubtedly be common currency, I'll be true to the critics' code and not spill it here.

On the way, there are the usual examples of Clarke's inventive genius, those creative surprises that no one else can mold so well from the bare bones of scientific fact—whatever the work, his is science fiction at its purest and most wonder-full. In this case, it is a tour of Jupiter's major moons and the many layers of the Jovian mass itself, and the marvels to be found there.

I presume as much garbage will be written about *2010* as

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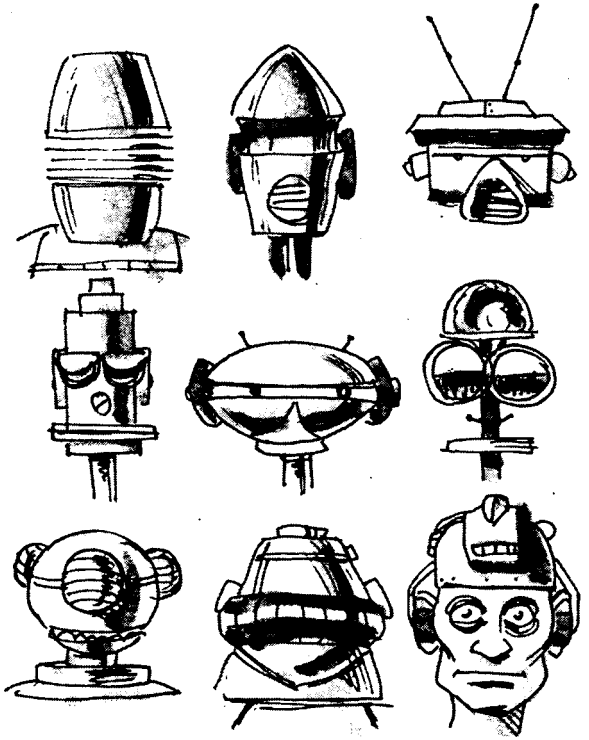

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was about the original; I don't intend to add to it at this point. It's a good story and a good piece of SF, as was its literary predecessor. But they both have that film looming over them, and neither can match it as an experience, at least for some.

So for those for whom the movie was a good flick and who want to find out what happened to HAL et al., by all means read and enjoy. For those, like myself, for whom the film was a transcendent experience, approach the new novel with caution. It doesn't compare.

Psion
By Joan D. Vinge
Delacorte Press, $11.95

I wanted badly to like Joan Vinge's latest novel *Psion,* her first after the sensational *The Snow Queen* of some years back. There *is* a traditional problem for the author, after having created such a splash as Ms. Vinge did then, in topping herself, and what might have been a perfectly OK work at another point becomes a disappointment.

Some authors meet that challenge by gambling on trying something entirely new. Vinge hasn't taken that route; *Psion* is set in a similar milieu to that of *The Snow Queen,* an interstellar human culture of economic extremes. This culture is based on talhassium, an element necessary to star travel; another key factor is the psions, humans with various extrasensory powers who are both used and discriminated against.

The novel revolves around a psion plot to take over the source of telhassium, a world called Cinder, which is really the remains of an exploded star in the Crab Nebula. A group of (nominally) loyal psions is formed to combat this plot.

Against all this involved skullduggery as a background, we get the involved personal drama of Cat, a layabout youth from the underside of the major city of the Federation (literally the underside—the classy sections are built *over* the slummy sections). A prototypical street kid, Cat has strong latent psi talents, discovered when he is dragooned by the press gang of Contract Labor for forced colonization. Given a choice of the colonies or joining the psion counterplot, he opts for the latter. There he becomes involved in an antagonistic relationship with its leader, Dr. Siebeling, and a more positive one with Jule, psion daughter of one of the rich mercantile houses of the Federation.

All of this is played out as Cat ends up in the mines of Cinder. There he finds a colony of Hydrans, aliens who have mastered the psi talents that humans are still struggling with, and lost their interstellar culture in the process, since they cannot kill. They have also

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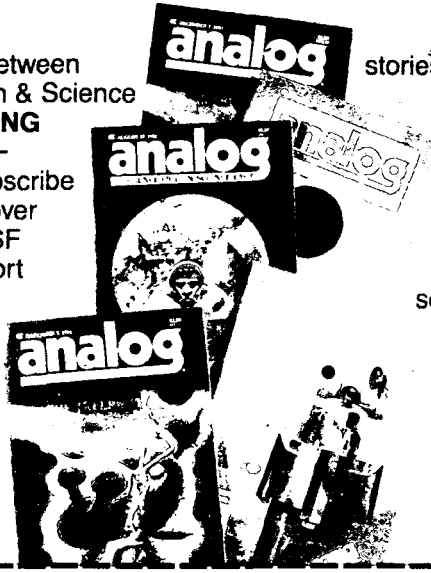

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interbred with humanity, and it seems that Cat is of part Hydran descent.

This gets fairly complicated, but as you can see, there is nothing really new here at all, either on the science fictional or the dramatic levels. Cat's coming-of-age, his growing awareness of his powers and his emotional needs, is a pretty standard business in SF these days, and his universe seems familiar in many of its aspects. The richness and originality that made *The Snow Queen* so exhilarating is absent, and while *Psion* is a smoothly written novel, perfectly acceptable from one of many other authors, the difficult truth is that Vinge has set herself a very high standard which she hasn't here met.

The Fantastic Saint
By Leslie Charteris
Doubleday, $11.95

The Saint, "the Robin Hood of Modern Crime, the Twentieth Century's brightest buccaneer, the devil with dames, the headache of cops and crooks alike" as he is described to excess in one story, has had an extraordinarily long career in crime fiction, as well as films and TV. The fiction has consisted of both novels and short stories, and has covered a wide range of themes, including a few that can be described as fantasy and/or SF. These have been collected in *The Fantastic Saint* with the exception of the early *The Last Hero,* the length of which precluded inclusion. The Saint stories are, of course, by Leslie Charteris; this collection was edited by Martin Harry Greenberg and Charles G. Waugh—why it took two people to put together a collection of six stories by one author is beyond me, but strange are the ways of anthologists and publishers.

I'm not a big fan of crime/detection fiction, and certainly don't claim expertise in that field, but these Simon Templar stories seem pretty thin stuff. They range widely in period: "The Gold Standard," the earliest, dates back to 1930, and is a standard number for the time, concerning a scientist (who's not even mad) who discovers the secret of transmutation and is kidnapped by a baddie and saved by Templar; in "The Convenient Monster" (1962), a Loch Ness monster-watch becomes a plot for murder which Simon foils (the fact that it's in the book gives away one of the twists at the end). In between, the Saint becomes involved with giant ants and a scientist who really is bonkers in "The Man Who Liked Ants;" a preview of helicopter technology in "The Newdick Helicopter" (one of those stories that was SF *then* but not *now*); and voodoo in "The Questing Tycoon."

The most interesting of the

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lot is "The Darker Drink," which actually appeared in the best SF magazine of its period (*Thrilling Wonder Stories,* 1949—yes, Campbellites, I *know Astounding* was around then, but it's revisionist time). It's a rather surrealist play with dream and reality which is good fun.

But I found, on the whole, the Saint—at least in his younger days—a rather tiresome know-it-all who takes all the credit for the amazing luck with which his schemes work out.

Writing Science Fiction That Sells
By Harvey L. Bilker & Audrey L. Bilker
Contemporary Books, $7.95 (paper)

I have an automatic distrust of books that tell you how to write (or sculpt, or dance, or make models out of toothpicks). Certain areas of human endeavor are partly inherent; partly learned by doing—and doing—and doing. However, I will concede that books can provide certain minimal guidelines as to how to go about it. The Bilkers' *Writing Science Fiction That Sells* seems to be such a book, despite the title. It probably should have been titled *Selling Science Fiction That's Right,* since it's mostly concerned with analyzing just what science fiction *is,* and the practical details of selling it once it's written.

The former aspect is on a pretty fundamental level, which is OK—I've come across an astonishing number of would-be SF writers who operate on that level, and to whom this book might bring some needed organization of thought. The marketing info goes into things like agents, contracts, and up-to-date submission requirements from publishers and periodicals (at least as up to date as possible given the current musical-chairs state of the publishing industry).

In short, it's an unpretentious and easily digested little manual with some very handy information.

In closing, I'd like to have it known that though I was listed as a participant in at least one event at last year's Worldcon in Chicago, I was never approached as to whether I'd be there, much less as to whether I'd be willing to take part—a pretty shoddy *modus operandi,* I must say. I regret missing any readers who hoped to meet me.

Books to be considered for review in this column should be sent to Baird Searles, % The Science Fiction Shop, 56 8th Ave., N.Y., N.Y. 10014. ●

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MARTIN GARDNER

FLARP FLIPS A FIVER

Lieutenant Flarp, a navigation officer on the *Bagel*, finished his second Mars martini. He and Ensign Pulfer, a new officer who had just joined the crew, were sitting in the ship's cocktail lounge a few hours after blasting off from the Mars Space Center. As regular readers of this feature may recall, the *Bagel* is a giant spaceship shaped like a bagel. It rotates continually in space to produce an artificial gravity field inside the toroidal hull.

"Let me have the tab," said Pulfer, reaching for it.

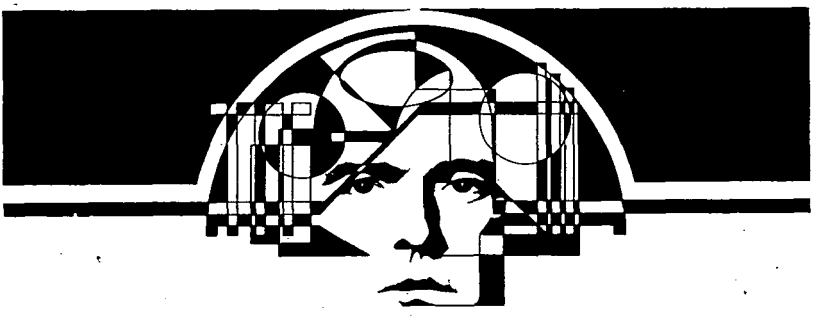
Flarp grabbed a bit faster. "No, no. This is your first drink aboard. I'm paying."

The two men argued for a few minutes, then Pulfer took an aluminum fiver from his pocket. A fiver, or five-dollar coin, with Asimov's profile on one side, purchased what a nickel would have bought back in the late twentieth century.

Pulfer handed the coin to Flarp. "You spin it on the table and I'll call heads or tails."

"If you insist," shrugged Flarp. "But spinning is out of the question. I'll flip it instead."

Why did Lieutenant Flarp refuse to spin the coin? The surprising answer is on page 87.



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IAsfm Puzzle #8 by Merl H. Reagle

CHANGING CHARACTER

ACROSS

1 Finney's fabulous doctor
4 U. S. S. Nautilus was the first
8 Water
11 X
13 Original words as written
14 X
15 "Life Begins ——"
16 Stepney quaff
17 See 3 Down
18 Track down hiders
20 Jupiter and Neptune, e.g.
22 Dosage associated with 71 Across
24 Get mad, laugh, cry, etc.
28 Word to a muddy dog
30 —— right (deserves)
33 In the least
36 Living room in a casa
37 Room for enjoyment
38 Ironic initials of a Soviet leader
39 X
42 Adj. ending
43 Medical suffix
44 Essence
45 X
47 Large-scale slaughter
50 Thumbs up in space
51 Mumbled mot
52 Part of Popeye's motto
54 Boss in the morning, perhaps
58 Ending for glob or tub
61 French article
63 Fish or fuel
64 Plus others
67 X, in genetics
70 Teller's call
71 X
72 Only number that has no letters in common with its ordinal
73 Legal or organ endings
74 Sitter's subject

DOWN

1 Dwelt
2 Turkish title
3 With 17 Across, Nat "King" Cole hit
4 "Based on —— story"
5 Hers, in Latin
6 Oft ornate objets d'art
7 Eliot's Adam
8 —— up (excited)
9 Board that illustrates 23 Down
10 —— 60 in 6 seconds
11 Minuteman's home
12 Call off a launching
13 X
14 Magazine, to a magazine-hater
19 Mr. Ford's nickname
21 Star's nickname?
23 X —— in measurement
25 Combining form for a heart part
26 Milieu of 13 Down
27 Cal and Texas
29 Nanook's knife
31 Immeasurably
32 Adjective for a recruit
33 Greeting from Jack Lord
34 X
35 Early calculators
36 Nonfat
40 —— Dinh Diem, ex-president of Vietnam
41 PX shopper, perhaps
46 Old MGM rival

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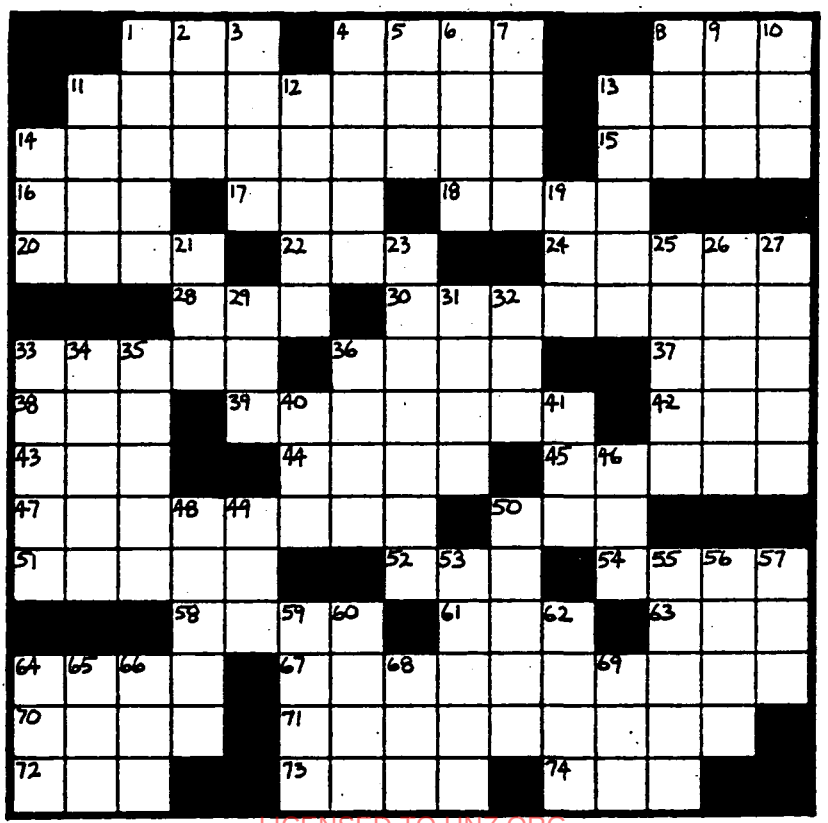
Solution on page 118

48 X
49 —— Aviv
50 "Take ——"
53 Certain lilies
55 Show no class after winning
56 Late actress Schneider
57 English river
59 Opening of a play
60 "Raiders of the Lost Ark" actor Jon —— -Davies
62 Word with ware
64 British rock figure Brian ——
65 X
66 Chopper's blade
68 LP stat
69 Sellout sign



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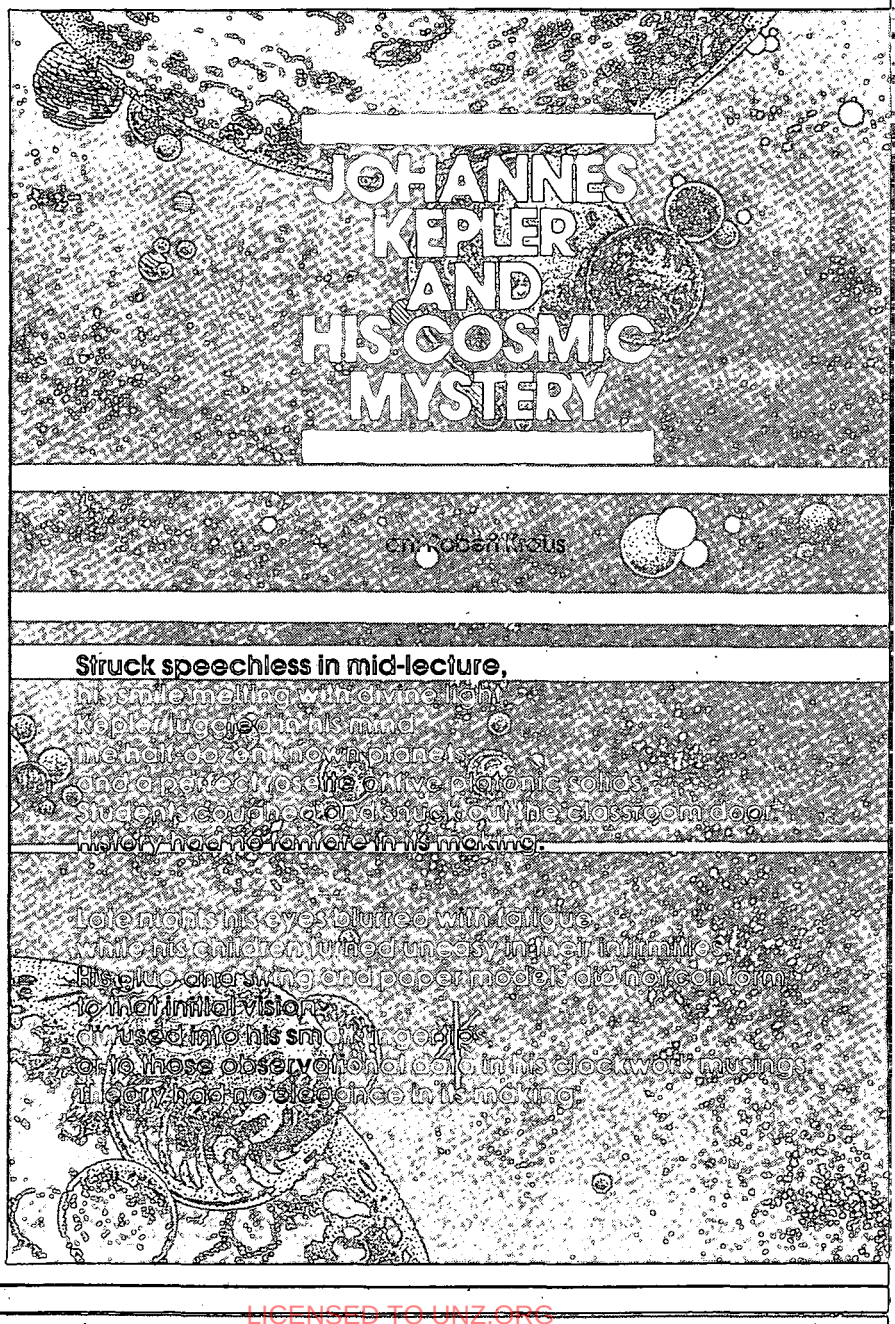
JOHANNES KEPLER AND HIS COSMIC MYSTERY
BY ROBERT KRAUS
Struck speechless in mid-lecture,
his smile melting with divine light,
Kepler tugged at his mind
the half-dozen flat planes
and a perfect fit of the five platonic solids.
Students coughed and shuffled out the classroom door.
History had no tolerance in its making.
Late nights his eyes blurred with fatigue
while his children tuned fine-tuned easy in their tiny tiny beds.
His glue and string and paper models did not conform
to that initial vision
or used up his small hoard
or to those observational data in his clockwork musings.
History had no tolerance in its making.

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Cast in exile to the keep of Tycho Brahe,
Johannes suffered a greater pain
than the brief fatalities of spirit:
inaccessibility to improved data.
His patience wore thin at elbows and knees,
yet the Cosmic Mystery still burned within him.
Dedication had no justice in its making.

Then Brahe's dying plea echoed through Kepler.
He cast his *Mysterium Cosmographicum* in the cold fires
of a deeper obsession.
He scribed and scribed the planets in their orbits
until Apollonius's ghostly hand guided his own.
Ellipses became more perfect than circles.
Beauty had no boundaries in its making.

All the dead-end years of dead research
flaked from Kepler's dark visage
as something eased within his muscle and marrow;
an analog to faith.
Astrophysics laid astrology to rest in his gentle sleep.
Persistence had its sway over truth
in the waking.

by Robert Frazier

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GAMING

by Dana Lombardy

Last month, this column looked at three very different science fiction board and card games. This month's column completes a brief survey of selected SF games that may appeal to you readers of *IAsfm*. If you've enjoyed some of the traditional board games like chess and *Monopoly*, you'll probably find some of these to be as much fun and intellectually challenging.

Five different titles all fall into this one special category of games: the mini-game. The concept was started by Metagaming Concepts Inc. (Austin, Texas) in 1977 and they coined the name "MicroGame®" to describe exactly what these games are. This type of game has a small format: small game board, only a few playing pieces, a small package, and a low retail price. If you consider a regular boxed board game to be a full-length book, then the mini-games are the short stories or novelettes of the gaming hobby.

Several companies have copied the MicroGame® format, sometimes adding features that improve on the originals. This competition between companies helps keep creativity flowing and the quality level of the mini-games on a par with the larger-format games that contain hundreds of playing pieces and dozens of pages of rules, but which don't always equal the minis in story line or playability.

Invasion of the Air-Eaters (Metagaming Concepts, Inc., Box 15346, Austin, TX 78761) An alien generation ship has invaded Earth, and its air converters are remaking this planet's atmosphere to suit their needs. These alien survivors from another star must do this despite "indigenous biological activity," and it's up to Earth people to band together to fight them or die gasping.

The small 12-inch-by-14-inch map that's part of the game represents the entire world, with punch-out cardboard counters depicting armies, air forces, alien motherships, alien crawlers, production bases, and atmospheric converters. To survive, you must have crash programs of united Earth research and development to come up with the weapons necessary to defeat the air-eaters. The game is formated for solitaire play, as well as two-player and multiplayer games where each player controls a national grouping. *Invasion of the Air-Eaters* game was such a hit that a sequel, *The Air-Eaters Strike Back!*, was published in a slightly larger "Metagame" format.

Revolt on Antares (TSR Hobbies, Inc., Box 756, Lake Geneva, WI 53147) is published by the company that started the role-playing

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phenomenon with its *Dungeons & Dragons*® fantasy game. The game comes in a plastic see-through case with two six-sided dice. The multicolored map represents Imhirrhos, ninth planet of the star Antares, which lies on the edge of Earth's Imperial Terran Empire. The Empire is disintegrating and Imhirrhos is seething with unrest and intrigue.

A player can be either a household leader (of one of the seven ruling families or "houses"), the ruling Imperial Terran Consul, or the leader of the Silakka aliens. The leaders each have special powers that can influence battles, but alliances are crucial for ultimate success.

Outpost Gamma (Heritage USA, 14001 Distribution Way, Dallas, TX 75234) covers a different level of gaming compared to the previous titles: man-to-man combat in the far future. A small high-technology squad of Imperial Legionaires is dispatched to assist the colonial miners on the planet Irda from the rebellious natives. The elite troops expect an easy assignment, but the native Irdans have been arming and organizing themselves with the equipment obtained from raids on the miners. It will be a tough struggle.

A small 12-inch-by-14-inch full-color cardboard game map shows a portion of the surface of Irda, while the 154 color counters represent Legionaire troopers and commander, colonial miners, etc. *Outpost Gamma* is a two-player game that's part of Heritage's "Dwarfstar" series of mini-games.

Attack of the Mutants (Yaquinto Publications, Box 24767, Dallas, TX 75224) is not a mini-game. It's *smaller* than a mini-game, but there's also a version that's full size in an "Album Game" format.

The "Album Game" format consists of a box that serves as both storage unit and hard-backed game board. Printed on the inside is a more detailed 12-inch square game map, plus other playing charts. The entire game folds up like a record-album—hence the name. There are more counters in the Album-size version, and they are much thicker and larger than other mini-game counters. Rules are more detailed and include options not available in the smaller game.

If you're a fan of those SF horror movies of the '50s, you'll enjoy *Attack of the Mutants*. Old Professor Applewhite is the only hope for the world, but his daughter Penny is being carried off (again) by some awful mutant. Can her herioc but dense boyfriend save her? Frenzied dashes through the science building, mutants with names like Amos and Andy, and narrow escapes highlight this fun game. ●

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Photo: *Locus*/C. N. Brown 1981

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In which the already controversial author may generate even more controversy.

PROFILE

JOANNA RUSS

by Charles Platt

Aggressively independent female heroines. A nonviolent, all-female utopia. Explicit sex scenes—between women and women, as well as women and men.

These are some of the "controversial" things that Joanna Russ has written about. Personally, I think other aspects of her work are more important; I'm more interested in her graphic but eloquent style, her social messages, and her talent for showing real, everyday characters reacting convincingly to alien situations.

But her "shocking stuff" is worth mentioning as a reminder that what can be published today was once taboo.

Before the 1960s, science fiction was strictly for kids.

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PROFILE

Photo: *Locus* / R. E. Holmen

"... if you want to change people's ideas, science fiction books must be the least efficient way to do it. You're reaching so many fewer people than you would, say, in movies or television. And many of the people you're reaching are such techni-freaks, they have very decided ideas about things already."

Aiming their books and magazines entirely at teenagers, publishers avoided any "heavy" or "offensive" material. They knew it would be vetted by suspicious parents and librarians who would ban a book or cancel a magazine subscription if there was so much as a hint of sex. And by "sex" I do not mean *pornography*; through the 1950s, you could barely get away with using a word like "thigh," let alone "breasts."

Looking back, it seems obvious that, sooner or later, science fiction had to grow up. But to say that change was inevitable is to ignore the courage and obstinacy of the writers who brought that change about.

Farmer, Sturgeon, Leiber, Ellison, Delany, Spinrad, and others, were met with anger and outrage when they started putting sex into science fiction. And this backlash came not just from readers but from editors and even some fellow-writers, who didn't like such a disturbance of their status-quo.

Today, the radicals have mostly beaten back the

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censorship. But for one group, the struggle was harder and the victory has been less complete. These writers were faced with an additional obstacle: they were female.

Apart from a few pioneers such as Andre Norton, Judith Merril, C. L. Moore, and Leigh Brackett, science-fiction writers were almost always men. To write it, you had to be an avid reader of it; and since almost all of it was action-adventure starring male heroes, it didn't attract many female readers. For decades science fiction stayed mainly male because it was written by men for boys. A classic closed circle.

When women writers first invaded the field in large numbers during the 1960s, they received a warm welcome—but not always for the right reasons. Look at it from the male point of view: after long, lonely decades, women were actually turning up at writing workshops and science-fiction conferences, inspiring at the back of many a male mind the thought: *At last, it's going to be easier to get a little action!*

In addition to this undercurrent of simple lust, there was some subtle literary prejudice—even among men who claimed to be open-minded. They didn't doubt that the women could write; but could they really write the hard stuff? Could they handle drive tubes and tractor beams and hyperspace? Shouldn't they leave high-tech to the men, and concentrate instead on more, er, appropriate material? Telepathic love stories, for instance, or whimsical fantasy, or cuddly little aliens. In effect, women were being welcomed warmly to the mansion of science fiction—but were naturally expected to spend most of their time in the nursery or the kitchen, rather than the study or the basement workshop.

This prejudice was largely unconscious, and not universal, but it did persist. Women who wanted to explore adult themes therefore had to overcome not only the usual resistance against publishing those themes, but also the slight but perceptible barrier to the idea of women writing

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proper science fiction at all.

Joanna Russ has assaulted both of these barriers more directly, more uncompromisingly, and more successfully than any other female writer I can think of. Ursula Le Guin is often mentioned as the one who has fought for feminism by describing courageous women in societies free from stereotypical sex roles. But Le Guin is well mannered. She persuades people against sexism by being relentlessly *nice* about it. Russ is more radical, and full of rage. *No more bullshit!* her books seem to say, as she comes straight out with strident demands for female freedom.

And so some readers complain that she uses science fiction merely as a soapbox from which to spout feminist propaganda.

Joanna Russ says that this isn't true at all. She's not a literary missionary.

"The only times I've done things like that have been in a few book reviews or articles for feminist publications. I don't really like doing it; it gets to be an awful obligation.

"I made a list of the women who write science fiction, who include of course Vonda McIntyre, Ursula LeGuin, Octavia Butler, Suzy Charnas.... I think the real difference is in tone. The tone of a typical Larry Niven story is, you know, 'If you get down to such-and-such atmospheric pressure in Venus, the temperature is such-and-such, and the rocket will malfunction.' Women don't use this kind of jargon."

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And I don't write fiction that way at all, with a didactic intention. I've never sat down thinking, 'In this novel I will try to promulgate X and clarify Y.' I start writing like, I suppose, anybody else, because I have some vague ideas about a plot, or something that just attracts me. I'm not really sure what I'm going to do until I've done it, most of the time. I structure the book beforehand only to the extent that I know I have to have a confrontation between these two characters, and then one of them has to go out and walk along in a forest, and think, but I don't know what he's going to think . . . and I don't know how it's going to end."

But even if she's not deliberately trying to convince or convert a reader, wouldn't she agree that the kind of books she writes are liable to trigger changes in people's lives?

"No. I remember reading, once, an article by an editor of a large-circulation magazine who said that there was nothing he'd ever printed that had not brought in letters from somebody claiming, 'You changed my life.' You can practically print a recipe for meat loaf, and somebody will write you and say, 'This thing has had such a tremendous effect on me, it's saved my life.'

"The messages go out, and I am not responsible for the receivers out there, and what condition they're in. If they twis the messages, there's nothing we can do about that. People are adults; they have to take their chances. That, presumably, is the reason we restrict what children can see and read, and we don't restrict what adults can see and read.

"In any case, after having had contact with students for so many years, I think it's a lot harder to chan somebody's life than people think. People will *say* they've been changed, but what they really mean is they read something which crystallized an awful lot of things they were already feeling. I don't think books really change people's minds very often; I think that's awfully rare."

But isn't feminism based on the hope that people's old, bad

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habits of thought *can* be changed?

"I think, like other political movements, it's based on the idea that you can make people conscious of feelings that they already have but have never articulated. One really cannot do more than that; I don't think it's possible."

Nevertheless, a stable and apparently happy marriage could surely be disrupted by a book which caused a woman to question her situation in a way she never did before.

"If that happened, I would answer that she was suffering injustices which are so obvious that only by an enormous social effort can a woman be *kept from* questioning them. You see what I mean?"

I reply that I do, but I don't necessarily agree it's that simple.

"That makes me kind of angry, I'm afraid. It's the kind of attitude I've encountered when talking to people, say, about socialism, and they say things like, 'Yes, but what is a socialist world going to be like? What is art and literature going to be like?' And these are questions which they have never asked of the *present* world.

"In any case, what frightens me is not that I will do something horribly harmful to somebody and will ruin their lives. What upsets me is that it's really the other way around. For every one person who writes in and says, 'You changed my life,' there are 999 who turn a deaf ear. I have much more the sensation of shouting into the wind than anything else.

"In any case, if you want to change people's ideas, science fiction books must be the least efficient way to do it. You're reaching so many fewer people than you would, say, in movies or television. And many of the people you're reaching are such techni-freaks, they have very decided ideas about things already."

Speaking of techni-freaks: does she feel there are any overall differences between science fiction written by men and by women? Is it true that most women write fantasy instead?

"This is one of those generalizations that an awful

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lot of people would assent to, but I started actually remembering who has done what, and writers like Heinlein and Larry Niven, whom we think of as being hard-science writers, have written quite a lot of fantasy.

"Then I made a list of the women who write science fiction, who include of course Vonda McIntyre, Ursula Le Guin, Octavia Butler, Suzy Charnas—she's never written a fantasy in her life; I don't think of *The Vampire Tapestry* as a fantasy, I think it's science fiction, pretty clearly—and, oh, Kate Wilhelm. I think the real difference is in tone. The tone of a typical Larry Niven story is, you know, 'If you get down to such-and-such atmospheric pressure on Venus, the temperature is such-and-such, and the rocket will malfunction.' Women don't use this kind of jargon."

Then is it true that men write engineering-fiction and women don't?

"There, I think you may have a point. But that's not the same thing as science fiction."

Are women innately better at dealing with the social sciences?

"That may be true, and if we *are*, we will go and enroll in those courses and get those degrees; it will take care of itself. But at the same time it's also true that an awful lot of this culture devotes itself to insisting that certain areas are not for me—that it's unladylike, unreasonable, dangerous, etc. etc.

"If there really are systemic mental differences between men and women, they are *not* the conventional ones, the stereotype ones. Those are just too convenient, too neat, too simple. I don't believe them. I really don't.

"I agree that where there are physical, organic differences you should get some psychological or temperamental differences accordingly, but so much of what people do and state is not a direct expression of anything physical.

"Samuel Delany once wrote a story in which some people, schizophrenics, can go through a space-warp and enter the fourth dimension, without

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being harmed, and nobody else can. In that world, that becomes an important difference. In the same way, if we find that, for example, payload is so critical in space travel that only very short women can run space ships, that's going to become a critical difference. But these kinds of differences are only important if we *make* them important.

"I would be very, very wary of anybody who says that the differences between the sexes just happen to follow the line that men have been laying down for the last 2,000 years."

This seems to mean that she does not accept sociobiology, which interprets almost all human behavior as being the result of genetically inherited survival traits, with man the hunter, woman the nurturer, and so on.

"No, I don't buy that. I think that kind of outlook has a lot to do with the economic depression that's going on, and with the kind of political backlash going on. There's an awful lot of mythology hidden in science. The pathology that was hidden behind nineteenth-century science is beginning to be fairly obvious. I think that the same thing goes on today in sociology and psychology, even in biology.

"From what I've heard of sociobiology it's very suspiciously harking back to—forgive the clichés, but I don't know any other way to say it—gender role stereotypes, capitalist stereotypes. I am very wary of anything so close to what I have always been told to believe, now coming at me from another quarter.

"The kind of research which I do think is fascinating is, for example—there's an article in the *New England Journal of Medicine* last month that links depressive illness with a particular chromosome. That's a very concrete, very one-to-one correlation in the human realm. That's solid stuff.

"What we have to watch out for, to keep from being suckered in, is when someone purports to explain not one particular concrete thing, but the way in which a whole species works.

"This reminds me of what happens to some women who

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become active feminists. The issues they want to talk about are limited and concrete, but the response they often get from their opponents will be something like, 'Yes, but what are the real differences between men and women?' The feminists are saying things like, 'The incidence of wife-beating is X-Y-Z,' and the response is, 'But are men naturally aggressive?'.

"The abortion question is illustrative of this. Women say, 'We want the right to own our own bodies.' And the opposition, the Moral Majority, say things like 'When does life begin?' That's not the point. I don't give a damn when it begins. I don't give a damn what the real differences between men and women are. I just don't want to be stepped on when I walk out into the street. I don't want you to tell me that you won't give me a decent job. I don't want to have a low salary. I don't want to be maltreated."

Joanna Russ was born in 1937 and raised in New York City. She graduated from

Photo: Locus / R. E. Holmen

"I think it's a lot harder to change somebody's life than people think. People will *say* they've been changed, but what they really mean is they read something which crystallized an awful lot of things they were already feeling. I don't think books really change people's minds very often; I think that's awfully rare."

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PROFILE

Cornell University with distinction and high honors in English, and received an M.F.A. in playwriting and dramatic literature from the Yale School of Drama. Since 1977 she has been an associate professor of English at the University of Washington, in Seattle. (I was unable to visit Seattle, so this interview was conducted by phone.)

Her desire to write goes back a long way.

"I wrote my first story when I was five years old—dictated it to my mother. I did my first novel when I was sixteen, and, I think, finished another when I was about twenty.

"My father was very much into popular science and he did a lot of things like carpentry, and roofing—he was a shopkeeper, and there were a lot of crafts that he knew something about. My mother used to read poetry to us; she'd get out the *Oxford Book of Verse* after dinner and we would pick out first lines and she would name the poems.

"I got much more encouragement than most writers get, and I got most of it from my mother. But when I went out into the world I found out just how atypical my childhood had been. I had experienced an early utopian situation; then came the bump of coming down to reality.

"For example, when I was in college, I got a very good education in English literature—technically quite excellent. But I got it from completely male professors; there was not a single woman working in the Department of English at that time. They encouraged me to go on to graduate school, without ever pausing to consider where I would ultimately get a job.

"The same professors who talked about literature as an absolute value never talked about the sexist messages we were getting from it. The rules of conduct of that time, in the 1950s, were completely different for women, on campus, from what boys were permitted to do. There was a peculiar kind of tacit agreement to pretend that the absolute values were classless and sexless, even though they aren't.

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"I don't give a damn what the real differences between men and women are. I just don't want to be stepped on when I walk out into the street. I don't want to have to go out at night in terror. I don't want you to tell me that you won't give me a decent job. I don't want to have a low salary. I don't want to be maltreated."

"You become a kind of schizophrenic if you try to believe that, if you are a woman, or if you're black, or Asian, or working class; you go a little bit bananas.

"I didn't go to graduate school, and I didn't become a professor, which was the usual thing that writers did. I wanted to live outside of academia. Academic criticism in the 1950s was horrible; it was the New Criticism, which was really poisonous to anybody who wanted to write.

"So I thought I would teach theater. That seemed far enough away from writing to be a nice sort of cross-pollination. But it was impossible for me to get a job."

So she ended up teaching literature, speech, and English, and started selling short science-fiction stories on the side.

"For a long time I wrote two kinds of stories: action stories with men, and love stories with women. And in the love stories the women generally lost, and in the action stories the men generally won.

"Then I started writing the

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Alyx stories, and that was really where it happened."

Alyx was a character who continued from one story to the next: a small but rebellious female thief, transported accidentally through space and time. It was a breakthrough for Russ to write about such a pushy female protagonist, but the stories were still told in the form of conventional adventure-fiction.

By the beginning of the 1970s, she was moving further and further away from that standard format. Ultimately, in *The Female Man* (1975), she published a truly experimental novel, full of pointed commentary on modern society, narrated in the first person by four different women, one of them from a future in which men have all been wiped out by an epidemic and women have constructed a utopia.

It wasn't easy for her to find a publisher for this book.

"It went around for about two years, to hardcover publishers, who would not touch it. Finally, my agent decided to try for a paperback sale, and Frederik Pohl, at Bantam, took it.

"These days I seem to be having more and more trouble getting stuff published—even though it's selling better and better, and the books are obviously making money. I understand that, of the series of books Pohl edited for Bantam, only two really made money, and they were *Dhalgren* and *The Female Man*. And they just happened to be the most 'controversial' of the lot.

"Most of my books have sold 100,000 copies in paperback over the years, and yet every time I do something new there is this complaint: 'Oh, we really wanted something like the *last* one you did.'

"I don't think New York publishers really know what they're doing. Book publishing, except for the most standardized stuff like Harlequin romances, is not a market-researched field. It's not a mass audience, compared with movies. I don't think they have the money to really find out what's going on out there, or to distribute properly. I think distribution

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is probably the worst part of it.

"What they all want is 'Something like the last one.' Because they know that that one sold."

I ask if she feels that dividing books into categories is part of the problem.

"Yes, I think it is, and I think it's getting to be more and more of a problem for all fiction, because of the distribution system. They think that if you put a recognizable label on it, it'll sell.

"The covers of paperback books are, by and large, the only advertising that the books get, so each cover serves as a capsule summary of what kind of book it is. The cover tells you what to expect inside: a Western, a Detective story, a Romance."

But Joanna Russ's novels do not fit the categories, and such books are not popular with publishers. Has Joanna Russ found that female editors are more willing to take a chance publishing her work than male editors?

"No, because almost all the women are low on the totem pole and have very little power in the organization they work in. They are often terrified of doing anything out of line; they don't really have the clout in the organization to do something controversial. I don't think it's any accident that a man—David Hartwell—has been one of the most adventurous editors in buying feminist science fiction. It's true that this isn't always the case, but it very, very often is. I suspect that the judgements editors make reflect what they think they can get away with—what they think will make money."

What about from the readers' point of view? Joanna Russ's work has such a personal tone; do her readers ever write and ask her, for instance, if she's a lesbian?

"Up to now, nobody has. But readers do tend to believe that what they read in novels is autobiographical. They say, 'You mention in one of your books that such-and-such happened—has it really happened to you?' And I have to tell them, very uncomfortably, well, yes and no. I steal things from

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everybody's life, including my own. But the novels are *not* autobiography."

Her current work has been beset not only by the usual publishing uncertainties, but by health problems.

"Several years ago, I began having trouble with my back—really bad trouble. Finally I managed to get a decent doctor, and an operation, and now I'm up again, but it's only been within the last five or six weeks that I've been relatively free from pain. It's been really, really tough, really difficult.

"I've managed to continue writing a little bit, but for a long time I had to do all my writing and reading standing up. It took me about a year to re-learn how to write by hand, which I hadn't done since I was about sixteen. I wrote an awful lot of book reviews, and letters, figuring this was one way to do it. And then I had trouble with my feet, because I was doing so much standing.

"I decided, finally, this year, that I would write a series of short stories. I'm always terrified that something is going to go wrong with my body, and I will be down in bed again, and I won't be able to do it. So I figured if I wrote a series of stories, I would at least have the individual stories, even if I didn't finish the series. I have one more to go, now, and David Hartwell has expressed an interest in them. I think they may see publication."

This would have been the end of the profile; but when I sent it to Joanna Russ for her approval, she wrote back with the following additional answer to a question that I hadn't quite dared to ask, because I felt it wasn't really any of my business.

"I take it that your question, 'Do readers ask if you're a lesbian?' really covers the question, 'Are you a lesbian?'. I think I have equivocated. I did want to explain (and still do) that fiction is pasted together from all sorts of things: One's own experience, other people's, friends, enemies . . . and so on. But it's perfectly true that the recurring themes in the work are the author's own

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choice and do indicate the author's temperament.

"In World War II (so I've heard), when the Nazis occupied Denmark, one of their first orders was for Jews to wear the dreaded yellow armband with the Jewish star on it. That is, in order to eliminate a group, you first have to make it visible. The day after the order was issued, the King of Denmark, King Christian (!) appeared in public wearing the yellow armband. Within a week, every adult in the country had them. And Nazi efforts to deport and kill Danish Jews were frustrated.

"I've heard that story used to indicate the importance of feminist support for lesbians. Now it's certainly a fact that I am very interested in gay women, and that lesbianism, as a theme, appears in much of my work. On the other hand, it's taken me almost a quarter of a century to perfect that 'personal' tone. It is *not* spontaneous or easy, damn it. Writing is *work*. On the other hand, I do use a lot of my experience (real or imagined) in my work.

"Sure I'm a lesbian." ●

Charles Platt, formerly editor of *New Worlds*, an influential English SF magazine of the late '60s and early '70s, now resides in New York City. He is the author of *Dream Makers* (Berkley, 1980), a volume of profiles of writers of imaginative fiction. The preceding profile will appear in *Dream Makers II*, to be published by Berkley in the spring of 1983.

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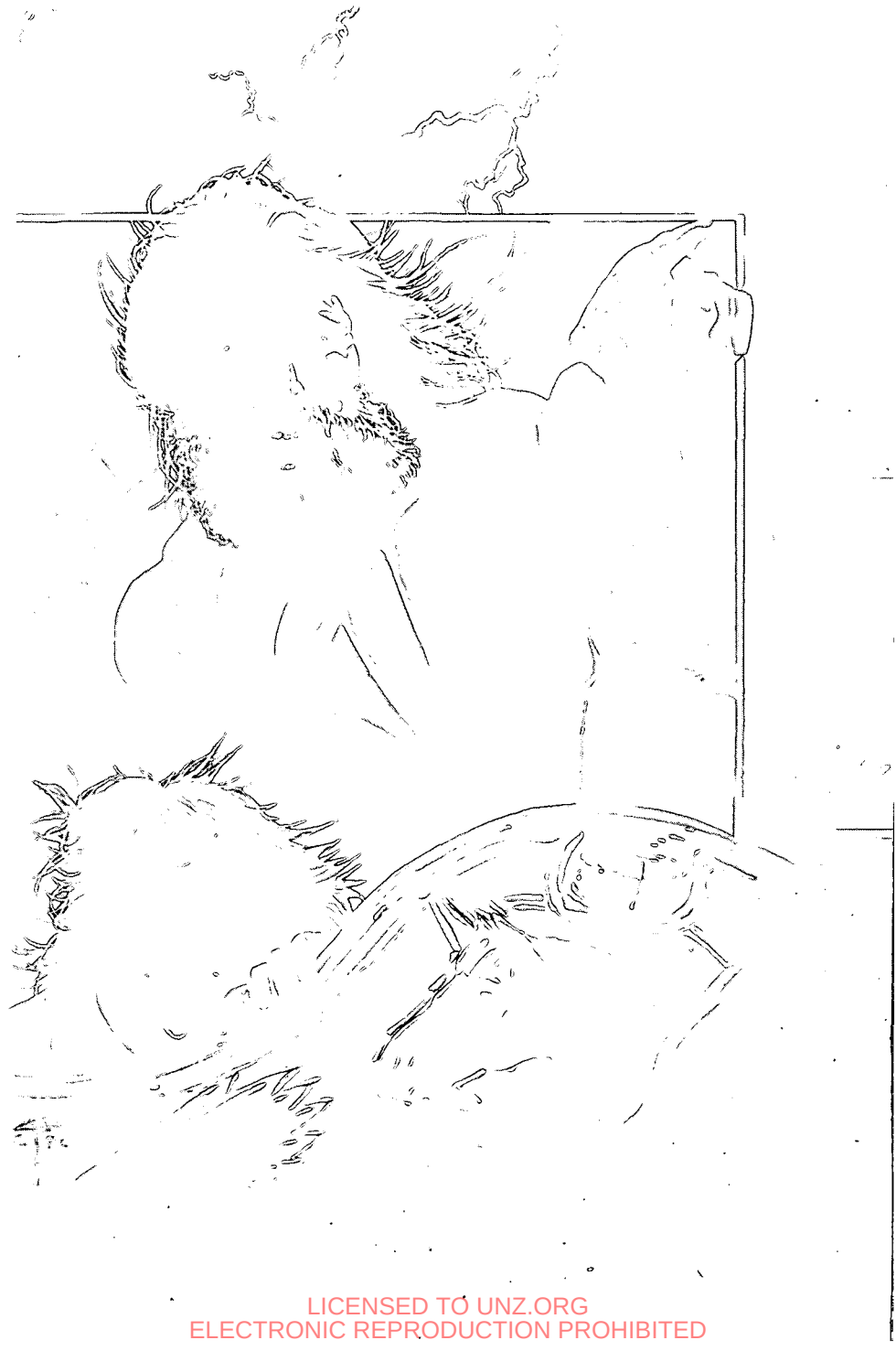

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The author lives in Santa Barbara with his wife and his two-year-old son. His novelette "The Dolls" was nominated for a Nebula Award in 1981, and his work has appeared in such publications as *Orbit, The Berkley Showcase,* and *New Worlds.* This is his first sale to *IAsfm.*

art: Gary Freeman

THE FOREVER SUMMER

by Ronald Anthony Cross

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If my first glimpse of New Olympus evoked within me some inexplicable surge of nostalgia (how to explain nostalgia for something you've never experienced?), then my first glimpse of the Storm King, Henry II, certainly did nothing to break the mood. A massively muscled man dressed up in a toga, with a curly chestnut-brown beard, long hair, and the expansive style of movement and booming voice to go with it. He had modeled himself after a statue of Zeus, that god of gods and all-time father figure. I knew that, of course. I had even seen holos of him ("Here's your mad uncle, Henry, the artist"), and yes, of his work of art, the New Olympus Asteroid. But holos don't prepare you for the real thing. Or rather, for whatever it is inside of you that those images trigger.

You have to understand where I was coming from. The City. The one and only Big City. It's one enormous machine, and what it manufactures is the illusion of continuity. Nothing ever changes in New London; its considerable technology is primarily dedicated to maintaining itself exactly at the level at which it has been for the last two or three hundred years. The lifestyle is designed to never allow the slightest shadow of change to infringe upon London society's complex but predictable game of getting on. I was not doing too well in that game. But at the same time I was a product of it. And while I was prepared to rebel against *The City* with all my very soul, I was as disturbed by New Olympus as any New Londoner would have been.

Mad Uncle Henry II grabbed ahold of my bony hand, nearly smashed it, and practically shouted at me by way of greeting.

"By the Gods, you scrawny wretch, Will, is it? You've got my eyes. Can't you see that, boy? For all your pallid New London demeanor, it's me you really take after. I can see it in your eyes. Here, come with me. First things first."

He led me over to his holo deck and popped in a cart. I kept sneaking glances at his mad, blazing, brown eyes. Did I have his eyes for real? Was it possible?

Suddenly a full-sized holo of my mother popped up before us, arms spread out to us imploringly.

"Dear Henry, I know we haven't ever got on well. I've always felt guilty about that. No, don't laugh, I really have. After all, I'm the older of the two of us. I always had the responsibility of guiding you. I know it was particularly hard on you that father had gone off to work the asteroid belt and left you and me and mother to . . ." She droned on and on in her typical boring manner.

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My interest shifted to the magnificent throne room. Suddenly I caught: "Whatever you do, don't let Will see this holo."

That snapped me back to Mom, believe me. Henry nudged me with his elbow and grinned happily.

"God knows I would never do anything to hurt my son, but I just . . . he's just driving me out of my mind. And his father, Arn, his stepfather, well, he just has done everything in his power to . . ."

Mom went on and on complaining about what a trial I was, especially to Daddy Arn, and how I was in trouble at school and had absolutely no friends and how one of my teachers had said to her just last week, etc.

I kept sneaking looks at Uncle Henry. I couldn't believe that he would do this. It was absolutely not possible for me to accept that he was doing this.

After an eternity of my mother complaining about me to Henry and occasionally shifting over to complaining about Henry to Henry, she finally wound up with her ending argument about how a change of environment during my school extended vacation might allow me to get enough space to straighten out myself in.

The Storm King offed the holo. "Well, I just thought you ought to see that, Will. Right out in the open. What? It's time for my ride. I've brewed up a storm in your honor. Yes, in your honor. The rebel, huh. You've got my eyes, my blood. Somewhere inside of that frail little scrawny body beats the lion's heart, eh?

He walked fast. I kept up. He led me down a hall. Up several flights of stairs—yes, plain, old-fashioned stairs—and finally to the tower.

And there it was. The chariot. All gold and gleaming and covered with little figures of lions and unicorns and eagles. The lightning gun was sheathed upright, a narrow gold rod, no more.

Mom's voice was still nagging me in my mind's ear: "Whatever you do, you must promise me you won't go flying off in his chariot with Henry or I just can't, in good conscience, let you go. No. Promise me, now. No joking. Swear on the Bible. 'May God strike me dead if I . . .' "

"Jump in." Henry always seemed to be talking beyond me, off into the sky. I jumped in.

"Belt up." I belted up.

I kept forgetting to breathe as we rushed across the skies of New Olympus, and below us the incredible blazing canvas of the Storm King's painting unfurled.

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"The waterbabies," he shouted off over my shoulder. We dipped down closer.

They were playing on the surface of the rushing river, the kind of meaningless noisy games all children play, pushing and tumbling each other, screaming and whirling around and falling down, bobbing about like corks. On the grass another group of them seemed to be playing follow the leader with some weird little animal I couldn't quite get a clear enough view to identify. But he looked weird.

"That's Pookie Bear. He's not really a bear. More of a rabbit type, with a little racoon and a few human genes tossed in."

We dipped down again, even lower. He waved. I caught a glimpse of a beautiful little nymph with a sea of rich brown locks, dressed in a loose toga, waving back.

"That's one of the clone mothers," he shouted. "Over there's their house." I caught sight of an enormous, classic-looking temple jutting up out of the shrubbery.

And now it began to cloud up fast. I could see more of the mothers down below, all identical, hustling the babies in off the river.

Suddenly it was raining hard. The Storm King laughed wildly in the rain and turned to me. And if he had appeared mad to me before, I saw now that I had only had a hint of his intensity. The rain was his element.

"Now," he whispered to me. "Now." He took out the gun and aimed over the side of the chariot. He seemed to be sighting in on the Pookie Bear creature.

Zap. A bolt of some kind of electricity or other flashed out of the rod and slashed down into the shrubbery, missing the Pookie by what seemed to me an inordinate amount. Nevertheless.

"What if you hit him?" I couldn't resist asking.

But he was already firing off again. Missed again, but knocked over a tree. This seemed to please him. He laughed again. "Oh, there's more where he came from," he said.

For the next couple of hours, we raced all over the sky shooting at everything that moved, hitting nothing. Finally the storm lightened up. We turned around and headed slowly in.

It was fairly warm weather. Nevertheless, after a couple of hours racing about the sky wearing only a summer cotton jumpsuit, drenched with rain, I was shivering. The Storm King, practically naked in his wet toga, goose bumps sprouting up all over his flesh, seemed to be charged up with energy from the whole experience.

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"The glory of a summer storm," he shouted. "There's nothing like it. Every one of them is different, yet every one of them is, somehow, the same. Enjoy it while you can. Summer is always a fleeting shadow. Before you can grasp it, winter is upon you in all its icy fury."

"Why do you have winter, anyhow?" I complained. "It's your asteroid. You can have anything you want. Why don't you just dial up forever summer?"

"Forever summer." He smiled. "Well, we humans don't want to have everything we want," he said. "We don't want to play games without rules. No, we want some form of order to create within. We have to have our seasons. The natural order. Nature's rounds. No, if we didn't have rules, we would have to invent them."

"Like New London?" I said. I couldn't keep the sarcasm out of my voice.

"No. Not like New London. New London is an attempt to completely block out change, and that can't be done. All life is change. But change within an orderly structure. New London is death. And at the same time, New London is escape from death. They think, people like my sister, your mother, they think that by keeping everything the same, each day like the next, they will be able to keep out old age, death. But the sad fact is they are old and dead to start with. When each day is the same as the next, why, there is nothing left alive in your life. All routine is death. They imagine they are immortal, and they have given up life to achieve that illusion. No, let season follow season but let the days within them be filled with change. Enough. Be silent for a while. Enjoy."

I must have drowsed off as we drove back in. I kept looking into the rain and letting my thoughts drift, and at one point I thought I saw a swarm of insects floating among the drops. But when I looked closer, to my astonishment I glimpsed the tiny delicate human forms with glistening wings hovering in the air. They darted and buzzed about. Ecstatic, yet somehow tragic. I had a momentary sensation of transitory lifeforms like bubbles, rising in bliss only to burst in a moment, new bubbles forming to take their place. They they, too, were gone. Had I really seen them, I wondered, or had I nodded off?

I opened my mouth to ask the Storm King, but he motioned for silence. I froze with my mouth open. The experience slipped from my mind.

Back at the tower he gestured to his chariot. "I will demand

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one thing of you," he said. "You must never take my chariot up under any circumstances. I warn you, if you should disobey me in this matter, my punishment can be severe."

I pictured him shooting lightning at the cute little Pookie Bear. "I'll bet it can," I said in my sarcastic tone of voice.

"Besides," he continued, "you couldn't control it anyway. You would be hurled from it like Phaeton from Apollo's chariot."

"Oh certainly," I said. It didn't look all that difficult to me. Practically everything about it was automatic.

The next morning I was surprised to be awakened quite early by a boy whom I had never before laid eyes upon. At first I couldn't imagine where I had got to, the room was so different from my little room at home in New London.

I was in an enormous bed in an enormous room. Diaphanous lavender curtains fluttered in the morning breeze. A life-sized bronze of Hermes was poised, ready for flight, in the middle of the room. It seemed to be contemplating rushing out the open doors onto the balcony outside. A small bronze table with a tall pink vase on it, no flowers, and the gleaming marble floors were the only other items to break the simple but majestic motif of white walls and white ceilings and enormous empty space. All the windows as well as the only doors at the far end of the room were wide open.

The boy who woke me seemed to belong here as part of the furnishing, while I—quite the contrary. It was not just the toga in which he was dressed, but the free expansive movements he made with his arms and hands when he spoke, the mercurial dance of expressions across his sharp bright face, the bubbling rush of his speech. The boy belonged in a younger, more energetic world than I, I felt.

"What, haven't they told you anything? Ye Gods! Then you must leave it all to me. Up. Up. We must be ready before—no, no, don't you dare go back to sleep, Bruno will kill us if we're late. You know—The Chosen One—all that sort of . . . But wait, how rude of me, Philo, I'm Philo. Ye Gods, your white skin. The machines will take care of that. Up. Up. Here, throw this on. No, forget your old clothes. Absolutely forbidden. New Olympus is the Storm King's work of art. You will have to be part of it, like it or not. Besides, your clothes—ugh—ye Gods, we're late. Come along, come quickly now."

I threw on a toga and, still half asleep, followed Philo outside along the balcony, which led entirely around and around the

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magnificent castle, winding down and finally inside, where we entered a long hall and went down a flight of long winding stairs.

Philo carried on an extraordinary monologue, all of the time gesturing and waving his arms about, turning this way and that, changing expressions.

As I finally really began to wake up, I was rather astonished to realize that my vacation at New Olympus was to be a very tightly structured existence resembling nothing at all like my idea of a vacation. In fact—I popped wide awake—it sounded like hard work!

"Wrestling? Uh, wait a minute, Philo, I'm afraid there's been some sort of misunderstanding. You see, I'm not your basic wrestling-type mentality. I'm more your chess-playing, read-a-good-book type of fellow."

But he actually grabbed me by the wrist and dragged me along, never slowing his pace, never interrupting his monologue.

Outside the castle, the boys were waiting in boats decked out as giant swans, bobbing off the banks of the river that ran around the front of the castle and turned into the large, complex river system just out of sight up ahead. New Olympus was networked with rushing, bubbling rivers. And the swan boats, which operated off of some kind of silent motor, drifted slowly upstream and into the larger, swifter river, where we continued upstream at an even slower pace.

The waterbabies were out now, chasing each other all over the river, screaming and shouting and playing all manner of pranks. At one point they tried to tip our boat over, but to my amazement Philo picked up two of the little butterballs, one in each hand, and tossed them an incredible distance, where they splashed and actually skipped over the surface. Then the rest of them all wanted us to do it, and we all had to do it over and over again.

"They hardly weigh more than a bird," Philo said. "The Storm King tunes their weight down when they're babies so they can run on the rivers. It allows them to develop more coordination and agility, or so the theory goes. I don't know how well it works, but it sure is fun. I really miss it, I guess I always will. I guess it's about the happiest time, what with the clone mamas and that neat babies' house, and most of all I remember running the rivers." Philo choked up. Tears were in his eyes. But a moment later and he was laughing and carrying on about the coming summer festival. We were all going to perform in the festival. He guessed it was the best time of your life. He seemed to have already

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forgotten about the waterbabies, and went on and on about the festival.

It was to last an indeterminate time, or rather it would be determined by fate or some such romantic thing. No one could tell when it would start or end. Only the Priestess could read the signs. We were to wrestle on the first day. That's why we had to work hard and be ready.

And work hard we did. This was why I had cut my school year in half to get here for the New Olympus summer? Every morning we sailed out in our swan boats to a grassy expanse and spent the entire morning practicing wrestling holds, driven by The Chosen One, a super-powerful brute named Bruno, who seemed to take particular delight in tossing my skinny frame about like a rag doll, for the amusement of the other boys. I hated it with a vengeance, but there didn't seem to be any way out of it.

In the afternoons we would lay on the tables in the gymnasium and toss ribald jokes back and forth while the attendants strapped the pads onto all our muscles and then spasmed them for a few seconds with electricity. Most of the boys went through this experience, which at first I found excruciatingly uncomfortable but later came to rather enjoy, only twice a week. But I was to undergo it every other day, due to my emaciated, pallid, New London condition, as my Uncle Henry liked to put it.

Then, after showers and lunch with the boys, I was finally free to do whatever I wished for a few hours until dinner, which was such a lavish drawn-out affair that by the time it was ended it was all I could do to get back to my room without curling up somewhere along the way in the corner of some great room and going to sleep right there. They probably would have taken me for a statue. "The Sleeping Shepherd Boy," or perhaps "The God of Exhaustion."

I remember that for the first week I was miserable, just tired and achy and exhausted all the time. All of my energy went into finding a way out. But there was no way out. And besides, although I was having trouble admitting it, what would I do with my time once I had worked my way out of it? Lie around my room, or take walks alone while the boys were out wrestling on the field?

And after a while it became obvious to me that Philo and I were becoming fast friends. It would have been hard not to become friends with Philo, he was so enthusiastic and full of energy, the opposite of me in every respect. Where I was medium height but quite slender and narrow of shoulder and hip, he was short and

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broad and heavy. Where he was ebullient and talkative, I was cautious and measured in my speech, if somewhat glib on the surface. Where he wrestled with instinctive fervor and counted on his surplus energy to extricate himself from the jams his impulsive moves got him into, I wrestled with a light speedy style always dominated by rational thought. I always planned out my general approach, calculating the weaknesses and strengths of my opponent, and then kept altering and shifting my plan during the match.

Yes, wonder of wonders, I was learning how to wrestle. And I was putting on muscle. With the third week I seemed to get a second wind. I started to stay up later at night and even woke up early in the mornings. Philo no longer had to come get me. I was putting away copious amounts of food at every meal now.

"What magic can this be?" Uncle Henry had remarked. "The scarecrow is blossoming into a statue of young Hermes."

Yes, I was rapidly adding muscle to my slender frame, although it was still obvious that suppleness and speed were my forte and always would be; never strength. And I *was* learning to wrestle, although there was not yet cause here for Bruno to worry.

Bruno was clearly our champion and hero. Tall, superbly built, with the perfect balance of muscularity and flexibility, with the smoothest, swiftest, most aggressive wrestling style, complemented by the great strength necessary to apply the finishing touches: Bruno, who could run the fastest, jump the highest, shout the loudest, was the complete physical pattern the rest of us were applying to our growth.

If one of us had strength, why, he molded it after Bruno's strength. If one of us had speed, he practiced Bruno's footwork. Bruno had everything. He was New Olympus's Young God.

But I didn't like him. "I don't believe in gods," I had told Uncle Henry. "At least we have something in common," he said. He had surprised me with that one. And I didn't believe in Bruno. Something about him was cold, too self-contained, too wonderful to be true. When he swept over you in a match, like fire over wood, yielding wherever you showed strength, surging in wherever you showed weakness, and settled you effortlessly into one of his unbreakable locks, it seemed to me that he always twisted a bit too hard, and held on a bit too long after you had given up.

One day during a rest period I walked across the grassy expanse and was approaching the thick grove of trees at the far end. Some sort of oak trees, I would guess, huge and ancient looking and so

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close together that the tops were interwoven one with the other, blocking out the sun.

I had noticed this morning that white streamers of some delicate cloth had been woven through the branches of the outer row as though marking off a territory.

I heard my name being shouted, and turned to see Philo running toward me across the grass.

"Will, Will. Stop. We may not enter in. It is forbidden to all. Part of the mysteries. No, I do not know why. But it is absolutely forbidden. The Storm King would punish you severely if he ever caught you. You may not cross the white streamers."

"Thank you for warning me," I said. "I didn't notice them yesterday."

"Nor did I," Philo said. "They must have put them up last night. The Priestesses."

"Well, thanks for warning me," I said. "I wouldn't want to go against Uncle Henry's wishes; after all, I owe him so much. Thanks again, Philo."

It wasn't until later in the day that I managed to break away from the others and sneak into the sacred grove. I don't know what I was expecting to see there, I only know I had to see it. Perhaps what my mother had said about me was true, that whatever was given me I tossed away, whatever was denied me I had to have; I don't know about that, but I had to go into that grove.

The moment I stepped inside I felt the chill in the air, and the light was blocked out. There was a pungent musty odor that thickened as I penetrated deeper, and the trees themselves seemed ominous, as if they were somehow aware of my forbidden presence: they rustled and whispered among themselves about my passage.

The songs of birds took on an incredible stark lucidity, and as I walked on and on I would find myself staring at some twisted shape assumed by the branches of one of those giants, as if—yes, I could almost read the meaning of it—as if I wanted to imitate it!

Then I heard the low piping of the flute and that led me to the clearing in the center of the grove. Here, once again the sunlight broke in. A lovely, totally white pavilion was set up, made of some delicate-looking but obviously durable cloth. It swayed and creaked in the breeze.

A young girl danced here. Or rather, seemed to be practicing dance. She would whirl about the clearing spinning like a dust devil and then drop down suddenly, laughing, and take hold of

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her foot and stretch her head down to her toes, then jump up and prance about, practicing some move over and over again.

She was a beauty. Her hair was long and glossy black and floated out behind her like a dark cloud. Her dancer's body was lithe and strong, but she was petite. I judged her to be a year or two younger than I, although her body was more mature for her age—the dancing, I guessed, would be likely to do that. My first thought was that what made her so striking was the grace of her movements, her carriage, her proud posture, surely the effects of a lifetime of training in the dance. But I was later to change that opinion. No, her ultimate glory lay inward; a state of awareness, something that pointed out to her, in moments of happiness, the shadow. In moments of sadness, the ghost of laughter. Something bittersweet. It was this curse/gift that ruled over her posture, her expressions, her manner of speech, indeed over her very soul.

The flute player I could not locate. Perhaps she or he was situated somewhere close by. Perhaps high up in the branches of a tree. I liked that image. So be it.

What I had done so far had been careless, perhaps even dangerous—one could easily imagine my "mad uncle," the Storm King, self-appointed god of this entire world he had created, setting me loose somewhere on the surface and chasing me about with his sky chariot, trying to blast me with his lightning gun—but what I was now contemplating was totally insane. Yet I just had to do it.

A short life but a merry one, I told myself as I stepped out into the clearing.

"Hello," I waved nonchalantly as I approached. The girl froze up like a deer paralyzed in the moment before it takes flight.

I had sensed somehow that the only way for me to act in this situation was totally at ease, as if nothing at all unusual or forbidden were taking place here, otherwise she would bolt; and as much as I was gaining confidence in my new athletic prowess I knew I had no hopes of catching her in a foot race (or probably subduing her once I caught her).

"Will, the Storm King's nephew. You want to know what I'm doing here. And do I know how forbidden it all is, and why on earth, or rather, why on New Olympus . . . ?"

Her eyes widened even more, so much so they actually appeared round to me, enormous and round. All the time I approached I instinctively kept up a steady banal chatter. I had the sensation of approaching a magical bird and droning on and on to hypnotize it until I got close enough to put salt on its tail: one mistake and

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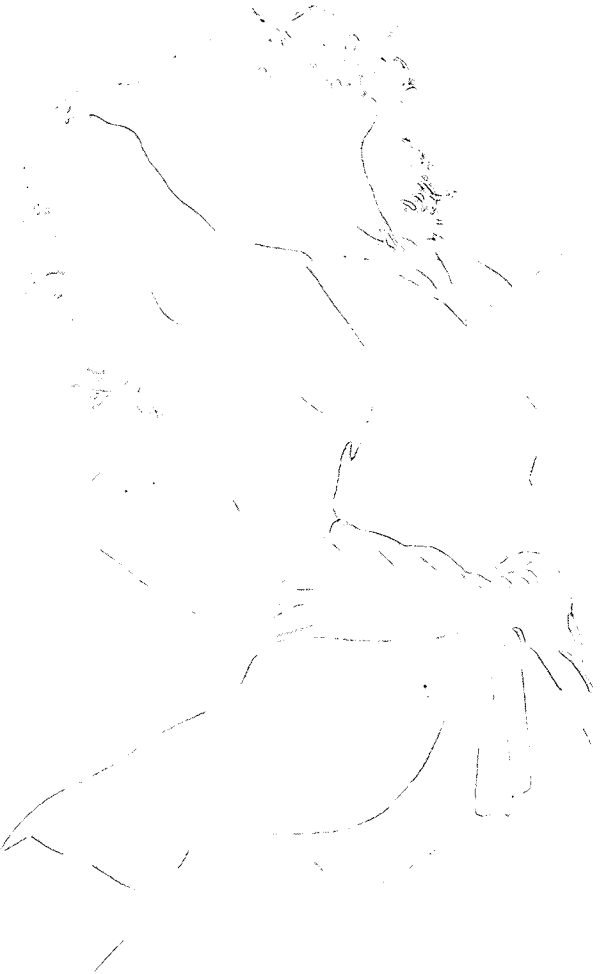

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all I would have left would be a handful of lovely iridescent feathers.

"Why did you? Really, why did you do this?" Her voice was higher pitched than I had expected, but sweet.

"I really don't know," I said. "I always do whatever is forbidden. It's just inborn. I had to come here, and once I got here I had to talk to you. I can't explain it. Perhaps it was fate." I was trying to toss it off lightly, but she wasn't taking it as a joke.

"Perhaps it was," she said, gravely.

Suddenly I felt certain that she was on the verge of turning away from me. I was illogically desperate, as though I was about to lose something immeasurably important.

"Look," I said, "you can't turn away from me now. You simply cannot. I have come here from another planet, another way of life, totally alien. I broke all the rules there. I'm an outcast in my own home, and now I've broken all the rules here, just for this moment. Just to get to you now. Call it fate or whatever you want, but you can't turn away from me now."

Then she did a thing I shall never forget if I live to be three hundred years old, like my doddering Aunt Hilda: she reached out and took my hand. Her hand was unusually warm, dancer's blood, but I shivered as if it had been ice.

"No I can't," she said, and once again for an exquisite moment her eyes widened. Who was hypnotizing whom? "You are right. And at the same time you are wrong. That is your fate. It appears to be your very essence. You are breaking the rules. But in some strange way you are forging new rules as inexorable as the ones you break. You don't even know what you are asking for, but the way you ask it, it cannot be denied. Very well. So you shall have it. I, of all people, should have developed the grace to accept the inevitable."

Something had passed between us, I knew not what it was; she dropped my hand.

And suddenly she changed totally. "My name's Inana, and I've spent most of my life studying the dance. I live in the temple of Iris, over there." She waved off in some vague direction behind her, and chattered on in the light manner of any young girl who is aware that she is effortlessly charming a young man who has come to court.

Spellbound, I listened. Not so much to what was being said as to the sweet, shrill sound of her voice. And her eyes. I felt that I could look into her eyes forever. And on and on she chattered, dancing with her hands, her body moving restlessly from time to

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time, expressing itself of its own accord. And now, as I pointed out before, emerged the guiding genius of her exquisite charm, a hint of inexpressible sadness that lingered beneath the surface of her happy chatter, deepening the chiaroscuro of her expression.

Finally, as if by some signal, she leaned over casually and kissed me lightly on the lips. I was stunned. "You must go now," she said. And now she had changed back. Her tone of voice was quite serious, even sad, but was that a hint of a smile peeking out from within the sorrow?

"I must see you again," I started to plead, but she held out her hand and touched her finger to my lips, cutting off my pleas in the most exquisite manner.

"You told me that fate was responsible for our meeting. Very well, fate will have to choose whether we meet again. If we do not, it will be a tragedy. If we do meet again, it will be no less a tragedy. Go now. Now!"

She turned abruptly and walked away from me.

How long had I been here with her? I had no idea. I kept trying to calculate the time as I ran back through the forbidden grove of trees, but my mind kept returning over and over to Inana. The touch of her hand. The kiss, of course, but more than anything I savored that first wild thrill when she had, seemingly on the verge of bolting, suddenly reached out and taken my hand. Surely I would be caught. I just couldn't think.

But when I reached the grassy meadow we called the gladiators' field, it was deserted. It was growing as dark outside the grove as it had been inside it.

When I got back to the castle, to my amazement, Philo didn't seem to have an inkling of where I had got to. The boys had all speculated that I had sneaked off for a ribald adventure with one of the local girls. I guess it would never occur to them that anyone would so lightly break all the rules of the game.

That night before I went to bed—not to sleep, of course, but to bed—I examined myself in the full-length mirror. For the first time in memory, I liked the arrogant clown I saw there. "You're developing style," I said to the slender, springy, young athlete. "Good night, sweet prince!"

The next day I noticed to my dismay that the white streamers had been taken down. When I asked Philo about it, he told me I was now free to enter the grove. It was no longer forbidden. When I asked him why, he merely shrugged, unconcerned. "Mysteries," he seemed to say, "are mysteries."

Of course I entered the grove and of course she was gone, the

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pavilion was gone, the invisible flute player was gone. The trees no longer seemed to be aware of my presence and the twisted branches were just twisted branches.

I wrestled like a madman. During periods of rest, I ran laps around the outside edges of the gladiators' field. When I wasn't wrestling and I wasn't running I thought of her. And when I thought of her, I was in anguish. Would I ever meet her again? Yes and no, she had said to me. And I sensed that there was no way to solve that riddle except to live through it. So I wrestled with an intensity I had never imagined to find in myself, driving myself each day over and over again past my previous limits of exhaustion.

And my concentration had somehow been focused by the experience into a narrow beam of precision.

Strangely enough, something also had happened to Bruno. If before he had been awesome, now he was positively frightening.

One afternoon I was squared off with Philo, searching for an opening, when I heard someone yell out in pain. Bruno had one of the smaller boys, the one we all called Jester, down on the grass, back arched up in agony and legs wound around Bruno's leg. Bruno was standing up swaying backwards. He was applying an Indian deathlock, I realized with a shock. You don't apply an Indian deathlock unless you want to hurt someone badly. And to my astonishment everyone was standing around, quietly watching.

Without even thinking, I jumped Bruno from behind and headlocked him, except that I hooked it under his chin so that it was a choke hold instead of a headlock. They wouldn't have allowed that in a wrestling match, but they wouldn't have allowed an Indian deathlock either. I jerked Bruno over forward, which was what I had to do to free Jester from the lock; had Bruno gone over backward he probably would have broken either Jester's ankle or knee joint. I don't know which. An Indian deathlock hurts so much that you can't even figure out what area is being hurt the most.

As soon as the hold was broken, I let my lock go. But Bruno came after me, pushing me backwards, face distorted with rage. Now, as if breaking out of a trance, some of the boys, led by Philo, got hold of Bruno and pulled him away from me.

"You, of all people," he shouted. "I'll murder you in the match. I swear it. I'll kill you. I'll break your neck."

"Well," I said, trying to appear more casual than I was feeling,

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"I'll be there. I might be too fast for you to get ahold of, but I'll be there for you to try it. Just try not to make a fool of yourself in front of everyone."

By now they had let him go and he had got control of himself. We were not allowed to fight, and not even Bruno would be quick to tamper with my uncle's rules. He smiled a nasty smile, and I realized how much taller and more muscular than I he was. "Good," he said. "Be there." And he stalked off.

This even seemed to make something of a hero out of me to the rest of the boys, and I must admit that I was enjoying it. It was the first time in my life that I can recall being treated like I really belonged somewhere. One of the boys. Right.

Something like a month had gone by since I had met the dancer in the forbidden grove. The memory was fading a bit as memories do, even in that brief space of time. And I was not so certain that I was correctly remembering what her face looked like anymore. She still haunted me, of course, but I was beginning to notice one of the girls who worked in the kitchen, a tall blonde girl who smiled at me a certain way. Bruno and I seemed to have settled into an uneasy balance. We took pains to avoid each other during practice, and there were no further flare-ups.

Then one morning I woke up and it was festival, just like that. I awoke to a loud chaotic trumpeting and jumped up and rushed out onto the balcony to see what all the fuss was about.

A small being that looked like a little boy but somehow was not quite a little boy was racing about in the clear blue sky throwing flowers out of a bag he carried. The sun was flashing off his helmet and he seemed to be getting tossed about a bit by the wind.

Later, when I asked Uncle Henry how he had done it, he tossed it off with a contemptuous wave of his hand. "Silverflash," he said, "that's a long story. And you wouldn't understand it anyhow, if I told you. Suffice it to say it's been done. He runs the skies, has done so for a couple hundred years. He never ages."

"Have you heard? Have you heard?" Philo shouted at me suddenly from the doorway. "No, you haven't, I can see that. Well. Best of luck to you, anyway. Whichever way it goes between us . . . We've drawn each other. We're to wrestle in the first match."

Something was wrong here. And then I had it. It was something everyone had been aware of except me. I had become good at wrestling, I knew that of course, but just how good I had never

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bothered to add up. I was so fast that no one had a chance against me except Bruno.

And now I could see it in my friend Philo's eyes. Drawing me for the first match was a piece of such rotten luck for him that it could only have been worse had he drawn Bruno.

The first match of the wrestling tournament and Philo had no chance to even make a decent showing. I realized suddenly that I had been, of late, tossing Philo around head over heels, shifting holds on him as effortlessly as had he been an inanimate practice dummy. Was I destined to make him appear the clown before his friends and family? And I could tell now that he was completely resigned to it.

"Well," he stammered, for the first time since I'd met him uncertain of what he wanted to say, "best of luck to you. Be on your guard, I'm going all out for this one." He punched my shoulder and rushed out of the room.

"I'm looking forward to seeing you wrestle, Will," Uncle Henry said from behind me. I'd forgotten he was still in the room. "I've been hearing good things about you. I guess all that training paid off."

"I'm not wrestling Philo," I said. "I can't do it."

"What do you mean you're not wrestling? You fool, it won't make any difference. Philo will lose anyhow. You have to do these things in life. Everyone does. You forget your friends and wrestle for all you're worth, and later . . . Don't you realize what they'll think? You're afraid of Bruno. Yes—even I've heard the story. They'll despise you. You have to wrestle. You have my blood in your veins. By the Gods . . ."

"Blood is blood. And I told you I don't believe in the Gods. I won't wrestle Philo. That's all. Someone may beat him. Someone may humiliate him. Not me."

I stalked out of the room expecting at any minute to feel his heavy hand on my shoulder, and Uncle Henry was someone I was not about to ever want to wrestle under any circumstances.

That was, of course, the end of my one brief and only period as "one of the boys." As it turned out, even Philo despised me for it. What could I possibly tell him? That I didn't want to humiliate him? "They say you're afraid of Bruno," he stammered the last time he talked to me.

"Let them say what they want," I said. "Talk is cheap." And by the stricken look on his face I realized he thought I meant by that him too, and more, I realized that I did mean him too.

Bruno, of course, won the tournament, as he no doubt would

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have anyhow. And he was, according to hearsay, particularly hard on Philo. So in his way the Storm King was right. What difference did any of it make? I wandered through the festival alone, tasting the wine and fruits and hoping for a glimpse of her, but knowing somehow I would not have it. It almost seemed to me now that I had dreamed it. It was so nebulous, and fading so fast; like a dream it had almost seemed to mean something so very important; but when you wake up, how quickly the meaning slips away.

That night, festival and all, I went to bed quite early. Everything had gone sour on me, and I just wanted my vacation to be over with. My uncle Henry, although he didn't mention the wrestling again, seemed to be avoiding me, along with the boys. I felt as weary as if I had wrestled with Bruno, and lost. I sank immediately into a very deep and dreamless sleep.

At least it was dreamless at first. But then I seemed to be having the weirdest kind of dream. Something was hopping and piping out in a thin little voice so peculiar and comic that it just had to be a dream. Didn't it?

"Get up. Get up. Get up. Oh my goodness gracious you has to get up right now. Doesn't you? Yes yes yes. You do. You do. You do."

I sat up in bed. There was no light in the room save the low nightlights that glowed in each of the four corners. The weird little creature was hopping up and down in the dark, piping out "You do, you do. Goodness me. Yes, you do. Wake up. Wake up."

Then I had it. It was the funny little Pookie Bear creature my uncle had shot at with his lightning gun.

Drowsily I registered a clanky metallic squeaking noise and caught sight of the Hermes bronze moving in the semi-dark. It seemed to have blossomed into life but somehow been short-circuited, as it was moving unnaturally fast in its macabre jerky manner. It would rush a short way across the floor and swivel quickly and rush back the way it came, over and over again. "Tonight's the night, tonight's the night, tonight's the night," it droned in its dead metal voice.

"He's awake, he is. Oh good good goodie good. Follow me, follow me," the Pookie shouted. (Pooka? I wondered, remembering something dimly about some ancient Irish or Scotch legend.)

Now that it had my attention it would hop toward the door, then back to my bed, then toward the door again.

I got out of bed and drew on a toga with gold and blue trim,

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and followed it. As we went out the door, the Hermes statue was still rushing back and forth and mumbling, "Tonight's the night."

Outside, despite the Pookie Bear's pleas to "hurry, hurry, quickly scurry," I stopped on the balcony to get the feel of the night. The cries of a few late-night revelers still drifted in on the warm summer air. I caught the scent of blossoms, wine, perfumes, pulsing on the delicate playful summer breeze. And the stars blazed. Was tonight the night? It seemed to me uncommonly warm, uncommonly clear, uncommonly sweet. Yes, there was magic in the night. But when we came to the enormous stairway that circles the castle from top to bottom, I stopped following the Pookie Bear and began to climb. It came hopping after me piping, "What? What? What?" like a little motorboat.

"We'll take the chariot," I said.

"Oh, no, no, no. We'll crash, splash, smash, bash, mash. Oh, no. Oh, no."

"We'll take the chariot," I said again. My voice sounded unnaturally calm to me, I felt as if everything had been decided from a distance, my whole life planned out, and there could be nothing more for me to do but accept. Receive. The tone of my voice must have convinced the Pookie Bear because he followed me silently for a change. Up the stairs. And into the forbidden room.

"We'll fall from the sky," he said once in awe, as we both paused to take in the sky chariot in all its gleaming glory. Then he hopped in and settled himself in the passenger's seat next to the controls.

As we rose off into the night sky, I could feel him shivering next to me on the seat, making a low whimpering noise.

The controls were simple and responsive, and I had taken pains to pay close attention to Uncle Henry on those occasions when he had taken me out. Still, I was amazed at how easily the craft handled, at how sure my grip on the controls was. It seemed to me that I was returning at last to something that long ago and far away had been mine. And mine alone. Tonight was my night.

"There, over there," the Pookie Bear shouted. But I already knew where it was that we were headed.

The sacred grove of trees was strung with brightly colored lights, as was the chariot I drove: like the Christmas trees back home, I thought.

As I floated the chariot down, I seemed to be both in it and somehow above, taking it all in like a dream. And a dreamlike image it was indeed, the grove all lighted up and the glowing sky chariot gently sinking into the brightly lit clearing in the center.

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Once again the white pavilion was set up, and like the oak trees, it was strung with delicate lights and tiny bells; for now, as we drifted closer, I could hear the tinkling of a myriad of bells and chimes fluttering along with the pavilion in the mischievous but gentle gusts of summer breeze.

The Pookie Bear now, shivering more than ever, was perched on the control panel where it could look down on the scene of enchantment. And it suddenly dawned on me that it was as magical and enchanting as everything else that night.

Designed by my uncle Henry's genius as a playmate-guide for the babies, the lovely little creature seemed to me now to be some sort of impossible fairy-tale being, hardly to be explained by the unlikely combination of genes—rabbit, racoon, and child, Uncle Henry had said.

But the human child element was unmistakable. Would it remain a child forever like the strange little messenger boy called Silverflash, I wondered? For the first time I felt the stirrings of a wave of awe for the Storm King's mastery over genes, his struggles into the forbidden area of age and time, his enormous artistic will.

But it was in the clearing, now in the first real unveiling of the mystery, that I felt the first giddying rush of fear, as if, after all, I had lost control of the chariot and was falling from the skies.

Once again an invisible flute had begun to play. A graceful familiar figure swayed and began to dance to the music of the flute, the wind chimes, the bells. It was Inana. And it could not possibly be Inana. But it was Inana.

"Oh, I must not see," the Pookie was shouting. "I must not watch. Oh, no, no. Oh, no." The Pookie Bear hopped away, back to the chariot.

And later, when that dance of all dances was over, and the last veil had slipped away to the grass and she held out her hand to me and whispered, "Come," I could only mumble in a frightened voice, "How can this be? This cannot be. You were a young girl but a month ago, and now . . ."

"And now I am woman in all her full glory. It is true. I have danced the dance that was my life, for—for you, Will. It was all for you. But the dance has not yet ended." And she said all this in a deeper, more mellow voice, not different, merely the fulfillment of that girlish voice I had heard before.

I shall not speak of how we made love in the pavilion, save to say that she was right, it was the exquisite continuation and fulfillment of her eternal dance.

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The magic of that night had entered into my awareness, in such a manner as to show me in every gesture, sigh, movement and touch, the secret of eternity. How no man and woman had ever made love like this before, and yet how this was all men and all women making love. Here. Now. How can both these things be true at once, I wondered? Then I realized that I would never know. I realized what a mystery is at last.

When I got back to the chariot, the Pookie Bear was curled up asleep on the floor. Soon it would be morning.

It was only a few nights later when the final mystery was revealed to me. I remember the feeling of absolute terror that overwhelmed me as I brought the chariot down.

No bells, chimes, flutes, not this time. The pavilion was gone. All that awaited me in the clearing was an ancient woman seated in a chair. An ancient woman, whom I had known as a lithe young girl and a fully blossomed mature lover—Inana. My Inana.

I fell at her feet shivering. I remember my teeth actually chattered. I wanted to cry but I could not. I just said, "It's cold. It's so cold. How can this be? I can't stand it."

"Ah, but what can you do but stand it? It is the final irrevocable truth. The great mystery. We are young, suddenly we mature, we grow old and die, too soon, always too soon." Her voice was cracked, and thin as a reed, but it was her voice. Her smile was the same. And now, at last, I understood her bittersweet smile.

"You are everything to me," I said, "and so it will always be. You are my sweetheart. My wife. My mother. How can there ever be another woman for me?"

"There is no other woman," she answered in ancient, cracking voice. "We are all the same woman. These sacred nights are nestled within the belly of eternity. Haven't you divined that? You of all men?

"When first you came to me, when I was a young girl, I was so startled because I was awaiting someone else. The Chosen One. The trees had been marked off with streamers as a sign for him to come to me. But you came instead. You chose yourself and came in his place. What could I do? You were as much a part of the mystery to me as was I to you. Never was it like this before. Always was it like this before.

"No, you will take other girls, women. And they will all be different but they will all be me. Us." Her voice hissed the word, and it seemed to hang in the hot summer air like a ripe fruit trembling on the branch. Still, I felt a terrible chill from within.

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"Go now," she said. "The mystery is over. I'm dying. Go away."

"I can't leave you to die alone," I said.

"We all must die alone," she said. "Go now, my eternal beloved."

I went. I wanted to stay but I went. I wanted to say something more but I could not speak. I wanted to cry but I could not cry.

Back at the castle, as I stumbled trancelike up the stairway I heard someone calling me from the great dining hall. The voice was muffled as though someone was speaking through a cloak, which he was. And when I entered in, I could barely make out in the glow of the four soft nightlights from each wall, the tall muscular figure waiting for me, but all the same I recognized it, for you could hardly mistake Bruno for anyone else.

I can't stand any more, I thought, not tonight. But the mystery went on and on of its own accord, and now all of us humans involved in it were clearly only its pawns.

And so finally I had my wrestling match with Bruno. It began in the dark. He surged across the room, tried to grapple with me and I tried to slip out to the side. We smashed into a chair and went over, but I slipped free, and both of us came to our feet quickly again.

The lights came on. Good, I thought. I needed the light more than he. But I never stopped to wonder who had turned them on.

I had no time. Bruno charged me immediately, obviously intending to press me continuously and give me no rest. And of course he assumed that I would avoid him all I possibly could. But he was wrong. I knew I couldn't avoid him. I made a half-hearted attempt to box. But you can't box a wrestler. Not one like Bruno. They will charge in and take a punch or two and tackle you down onto the floor and then you've had it. You can only wrestle a wrestler.

So I did the opposite of what he expected. I let him catch me around the waist and I latched my arms around his neck once again in the same headlock that was really a choke hold that I had applied on him before.

I tried to pull him over forward but he was too strong. He lifted me up by the legs and carried me, rather like a husband carrying a bride over the threshold.

"You'll have to squeeze harder than that," he said, and slammed me into the wall. I held on. "Okay, I will," I said. I gritted my teeth and clamped down.

He grabbed my wrists and pulled them apart. But I had my

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fingers locked. Even so, he actually managed to pry my arms apart and thrust me away. That's how strong he was.

But I flew back on him like a spring released, and latched the same lock around his neck and clamped down again.

This time he picked me up and surged across the room and threw both of us into the table. We bounced off the table, knocked over a couple of chairs, and went down on the floor, him on top.

I gritted my teeth and clamped down harder. "You'll have to squeeze harder than that," he said again. But his voice was a hoarse whisper now. I gritted my teeth and clamped down harder.

In the long run, Uncle Henry had once remarked, endurance is everything. But not so much endurance, I discovered, as tenacity of mind. Will. I just kept squeezing harder no matter what Bruno did, no matter that it seemed I couldn't possibly do it. I just did it anyway.

And then, at last, I was on top and squeezing harder all the time, drenched with sweat, all the muscles of my body in an agony of all-out exertion.

"Give up."

"Never." But a whisper.

"Give up."

"Never." But I could hardly hear it.

Towards the end he was only mouthing the words. Nothing came out. I remember that his face was actually turning a shade of purple.

Finally I left him on the floor. Got a carafe of leftover wine from the table and poured a fair dollop of it on his face. I wondered if he was dead. He certainly looked it. But no, he choked and sat up.

For a moment he just sat there. And then the tears started to come. I envied him that.

"I was to be The Chosen One," he said. "You stole it from me. You stole everything."

He got up and started out, but in the doorway he turned. "I would have taken you in the wrestling match. I would have whipped you. They don't allow chokes. They have rules, you know."

"I'm the one who always breaks the rules," I said wearily, and turned away. It was then I noticed my Uncle Henry for the first time, seated in his throne-like chair at the end of the table, feet up, wineglass in hand, obviously well into his cups. It was he who had turned on the lights.

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"Come and have a drink with me. Bring that bottle you have in your hand. More wine's always welcome at the mysteries."

I sat down. Took a swig from the bottle. It tasted pungent, bitter, but good. I had another swallow.

He was shaking his head at me. "When the young Apollo strides angrily through the halls of Olympus, even Zeus dare not remain seated," he said.

"I told you before, I don't believe in the Gods," I said.

"Nor do I," he said as before. "At least we have that much in common." He took a long drink. Filled his glass.

"Some wrestling match," he said. "You won it after all. None of the boys will ever know. They all think you are a coward. But you won it after all.

"Aren't you The Chosen One of all The Chosen Ones. The one who brought the mysteries to life: finally, totally and irrevocably to life. It's as if they've gone on and on all these years waiting for you to complete them."

"How could you do it?" I asked him, not sure how I meant it.

He took another drink. "I loved her once myself," he said. "It's true. She was an accident. One of my genetic alterations that went wrong. She was so lovely. And all of a sudden she was a woman, and she grew old and died. She was everything at once. I can't tell you the effect it had on me."

"You don't have to tell me," I said.

"Somehow it was so important. So awesomely important, that I cloned her, and then the mysteries were born. Every fourteen years I clone her again. Every fourteen years she . . . she . . ." his voice choked up on him. He took another drink.

I said something that came out a whisper. Then I said it again louder. "I don't know if I can stand it." And suddenly, when I didn't want them anymore, the tears came at last. And then I was weeping in great wrenching gasps, totally out of control. I felt myself lifted off of my feet and hugged up in an unbreakable bearhug. If Bruno had used that one, I thought, he'd have won for sure. But I couldn't stop crying.

"Of course you can stand it," he said. "What else can we do?"

He pushed me out at arm's length and looked into my eyes. "By the Gods, what a man you've become. You break into the forbidden grove. Steal my chariot. Defeat Bruno in a wrestling match. You have become a man. A miracle. Hardly anyone does it nowadays."

He hugged me again and abruptly let me loose and turned away.

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"You will be going home in the morning. I took the liberty of packing for you. The outer mystery is over for you. The inner will go on forever of its own accord. Go home. I will not see you in the morning. I never say good-bye." Abruptly, he left.

Months later, just as I was a week away from finishing my term at school, I got a holo in the mail. I must have had some inkling what it was because I checked to make sure my mother was out of the house before I played it.

Sure enough there was Mom, same worried expression, addressing Uncle Henry with "Whatever you do, be sure that Will doesn't get ahold of this. It would kill me if I thought . . ."

I shook my head—Uncle Henry, the mad artist.

"Will is even worse, much worse, then he ever was before. He's so arrogant. My God, Henry, he actually reminds me of you."

The holo went on and on about how terrible I had become, but I was no longer listening. I was poring through Mom's holos on a hunch. Would he have sent an answer? And then I had it in my hand.

"You can't control him anymore," the Storm King was telling us in that exuberant way of his, "none of you can—the school system, the church, you, or that mealy-mouth husband of yours. He's become a man. In all its glory. He belongs here on New Olympus, shooting the lightning. Because by the Gods, he is more my son than yours now."

And I knew that in some strange way he was right. I was more like him than Mom or Dad. I always had been, in that secret place where I really lived, inside myself.

The next week I packed a few belongings and left home. But I did not go to New Olympus. New Olympus and Inana were an eternity that lived within me now, forever in summer. I knew instinctively that going back there would only mar that for me. For us.

I was headed out, instead, to the fringes of the belt, like my grandfather, and Henry's father, before us. It would be easy to find work there. Valuable training. They didn't care what schooling you had. It was out there mining asteroids that grandfather had made the family fortune. Who knows, one day a hundred years from now, I might build my own work of art among the asteroids. If I gained the money. The expertise. And if I matured into an artist.

I didn't even leave a note. I went out the door and left New London, and I never saw my mother, or Uncle Henry, again. ●

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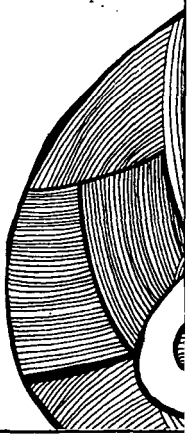
DARTS

by Steve Perry

The author is a fulltime writer who, in the early days of this magazine, appeared quite frequently, under the pseudonym of Jesse Peel. In recent times, however, he's been busy writing novels, and we have not seen as much from him lately as we'd like. His most recent appearance in these pages was with "Johnny Beercans," co-written with George Florance-Guthridge, in the October 1982 issue.

art: D. Della Ratta



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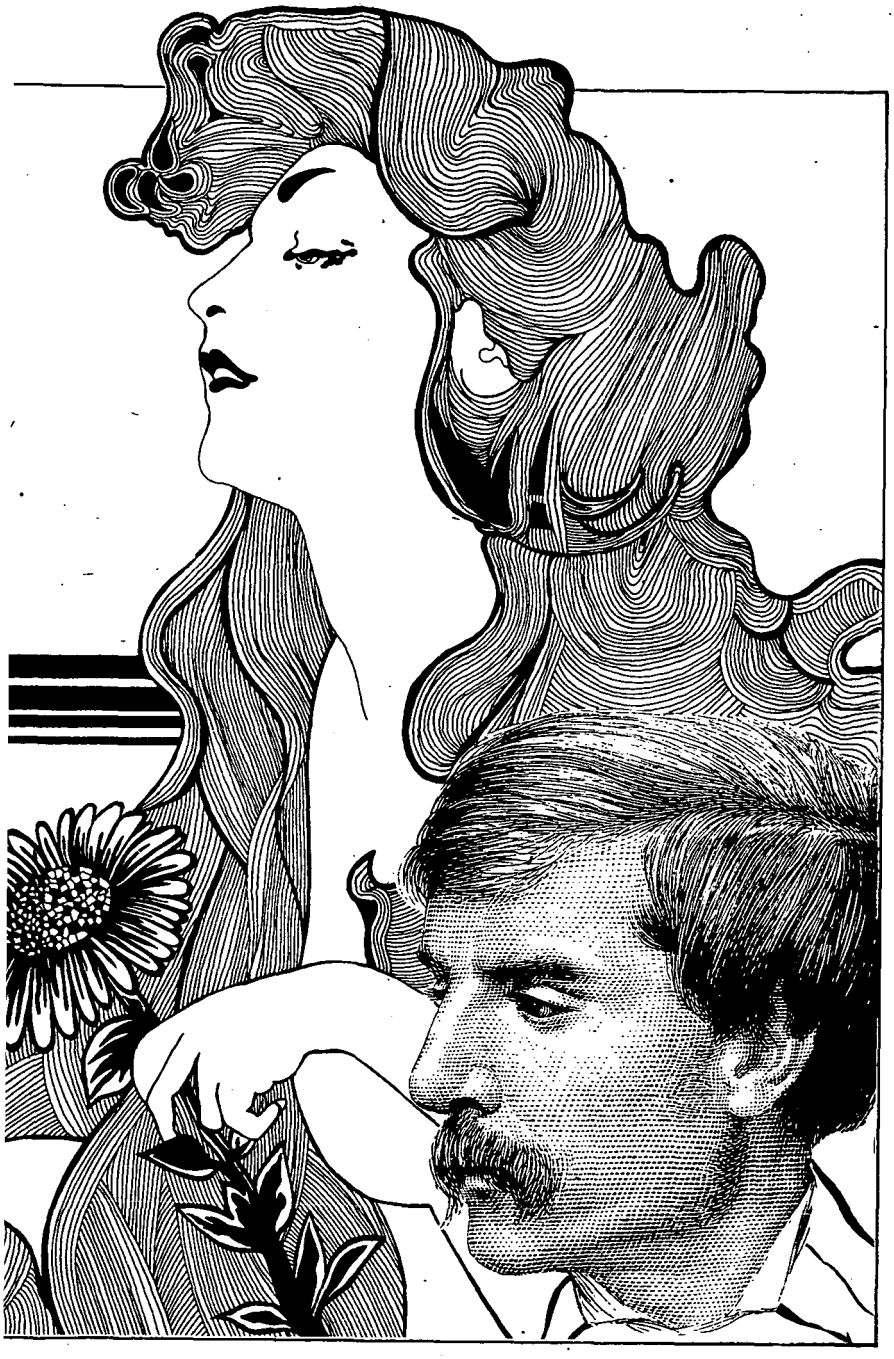

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"Stand by," the heavy-set technician said. "Her EEG is climbing through delta."

"Check." Quinn already knew the stats; still, he glanced at his own computer screen again. The pale green numbers and words shimmered lightly at him from the darker green background. There was a color holo of the girl in the upper right corner. She had strong features: a wide mouth, sharp nose, high cheekbones, and ash-blond hair. Not a pretty face, but a handsome one. She was only seventeen years old.

Not this time, Quinn thought. He wasn't going to fall in love with her, not this one, he was determined. Never again.

The fat tech moved his arm over his board. "Bringing her into REM. Fifteen seconds."

"Fifteen seconds," Quinn echoed. He leaned back into the folds of the shroud-chair. He was enveloped in thick darkness; the too-familiar smell of bottled air washed over him. The seat machinery hummed and adjusted itself to his contours. The shroud-chair was well-named. And well-made; it was a major part of the most expensive piece of machinery in the Portland center—hell, in the whole of the Oregon hospital system.

Just as Quinn was the highest paid employee of that system. Once, that had meant something; once he'd been so stupid as to consider that important. But now? The fact he made more money than most doctors, even without the M.D. tacked onto his name, meant little. Past a certain point, money meant nothing. He had long since passed that point. Money could not buy love. Nor could it buy you out of it.

"Stand by, going to countdown," the tech said. "Oh, since I probably won't see you before, happy New Year."

In the depths of the shroud-chair, Quinn was puzzled for a few seconds. Then he remembered. Oh, right. Today was December 31st, 1999. Tomorrow would be the first day of the year 2000. That ought to mean something. But it didn't, not to him. Time was everything; the numbers meant nothing.

"Thanks. You too," Quinn said.

"And counting. Five, four, three, two, one—it's all yours."

Quinn sighed and closed his eyes. Yes. All his.

The hospital room was colored in pastel blue, too light, too clean to be anything else but a hospital room. There was one window, curtained in a slightly darker blue; the only furniture consisted of the mechanical bed and two chairs. The girl was lying quietly on the bed.

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She opened her eyes. They were a clear, bright blue. Went with the room and her hair, Quinn thought. He smiled at her. "Hi," he said.

He saw her confusion. Before she could ask, he said, "Portland Medical and Rehab Center."

She sighed. "Why aren't I dead?" Her voice was soft, but strong and smooth.

She looked so lost, so vulnerable, so dejected, Quinn couldn't help himself. He started to reach out and touch her hand. He managed to convert the gesture into a sheet-smoothing motion. Too early, he thought.

"Someone called. They pumped it out of you in time."

"Why? Why couldn't they just let me go?"

"That's not the way the game is played, you ought to know that by now."

Her smile was bitter. "After three times? Yes, I guess I should." She looked down at her body. Her arms were outside the cover sheet, folded so that her hands covered the flatness of her belly. "Where are the bed suppressors? Aren't you afraid I might try to jump from the window?"

"It wouldn't do you much good; we're on the first floor. And there are bars, though they aren't really needed. The doctors have you on a new drug, Hypostat. It keeps your blood pressure way down, causes orthostatic hypotension. If you try to stand or even sit up suddenly, you'll pass out."

"Oh?" Her lips pressed together into a wide, firm line. She sat up suddenly. The sheet fell down, revealing the top of an abbreviated hospital gown. Quinn couldn't help noticing the motion of her heavy breasts under the thin, loose material. He was close enough to smell her body musk, caused in part by the perspiration generated as a side-effect of the drug she was on. It was a pleasant odor.

"It doesn't look like your drug works very well, does—?" She fell suddenly, her eyes rolling back to show the whites as she lost consciousness. She thumped into the pillow.

She's going to be a tough one, he thought.

This time when she opened her eyes, there were tears in them. She was quiet for a few seconds. Then, "You said 'the doctors' had me on a new drug. You're not a doctor, then, are you?"

"Nope. I'm Carl Quinn, psychiatric nurse. B.S., M.S., R.N."

"What do all the letters mean?"

"My credentials."

"You already know who I am," she said flatly.

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"Um. Amber Alicia Delany."

She stared at the pale blue ceiling. "They've never given me a male nurse before." Her disinterest was apparent.

"That's all right. They've never given me a patient quite as attractive as you before, either." A small lie? No, not really, he decided. She was attractive.

She flicked her gaze from the ceiling onto Quinn, but said nothing.

Easy, he told himself. Don't push it too far. She'll just assume you want to screw her at this point. Back off. He looked at his stainless steel wrist-chrono. "I've got to run, Amber Alicia Delany—there are other patients here, you know. But I'll be back."

"When will I have to start facing the headsplitters?"

"They'll be around soon. This is a psychiatric unit. You've got to expect psychiatrists."

She turned her face back toward the ceiling. "It would save everybody a lot of trouble if you'd just let me die next time."

There isn't going to be a next time if I can help it, Quinn thought. But he said nothing as he left the room.

He only stayed gone for ten minutes. When he returned, he smiled and shook his head as he looked at her. She was sprawled face down on the soft-tile floor, a meter from the foot of the bed. The short gown had ridden up to expose her legs and hips. She had a nice tan, he noted. And a nice rear, too. He felt a small stir in his groin as he looked at her. Not very professional of you, Quinn, he told himself. But, he also thought, he was admiring her determination along with her body. She *was* a tough one.

He bent and scooped her from the cool floor. She was a small woman, maybe weighing 45 kilos and only about 155 cm tall. Her body felt warm and smooth in his arms. He carried her to the bed, tucked her in, and pulled up a chair. Even after trying to walk, the Hypostat wouldn't keep her out long.

Clear blue eyes again. No tears this time.

"All right. So your damned medicine works. I'd rather be held in by the 'pressors. I can at least fight against them."

"Blame it on modern science. Want to talk?"

"Not particularly."

He shrugged, then rubbed at his bare left forearm where it left the three-quarter sleeve of his labshirt. "It's me or one of the student headsplitters."

"Ah, Christ." She looked at him carefully. He knew what she saw. He was thirty-three, almost twice her age. At 185 cm and

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86 kilos, he was a fairly big man, in pretty good physical shape. All those hours swimming laps in the hospital's physical therapy pool did that. His hair was a shade darker than hers, his eyes a deeper blue. More than a few people had told him he wasn't unattractive. God knew he had reason enough to know that.

"Okay," she said. "What do you want to talk about?"

"Oh, like why you keep taking large quantities of pills, trying to kill yourself."

She looked away from him, back at the ceiling. "Well, maybe it could be over-reaction to a chaotic society for which I was never mentally prepared. Or perhaps a repressed desire to return to womb-security, maybe due to latent idiopathic schizophrenic tendencies, just possibly related to birth-trauma. You want more?"

He shook his head. "No thanks. I didn't like the jargon when I had to study it; I still don't. Big words are a protection from those not in the profession. A kind of power mantra."

"You asked."

"Okay. So let's talk about something else."

"Get the patient's mind off her troubles, is that it?"

"Why not? What's your favorite flower?"

She jerked her head back to stare at him. "This a new therapy the splitters dreamed up?"

"No. Just curious." A definite lie this time. But it's for her own good.

"All right. Sunflowers."

"Really? How come?"

"Because they're tall and strong. Because they enjoy the sunlight so much. Maybe because nobody else thinks of them as their favorite flower. You ought to be able to make tons of psychiatric symbolism from that."

"Like to swim?"

"You got that from my file." A flat statement.

"No. *I* like to swim. Maybe when they let you up and around, we might go. There's a pretty nice pool on the grounds; indoors, heated and all."

"Aren't you afraid I might try to drown myself?"

"Nope. I used to be a lifeguard." Still am, he thought. Did he feel as bitter as she sounded? Close.

"Maybe," she said. "We'll see."

He stuck his head around the door jamb. "Hi."

Amber looked up from the bed. The thing was adjusted to a

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sitting position; they had scaled her medication downward slightly so she could sit without losing consciousness.

"Hello. You coming in or just passing by?" Did he detect a hint of real interest there?

"Coming in." Quinn did so, pushing a large flower pot stand in front of him. In the tub stood a meter-and-a-half tall sunflower. "Brought you something."

Her smile was a small one, but definite. "Where did you find that? It's the middle of the winter."

"A friend of mine raises flowers. He has a hothouse." That was true enough. Only he was more than merely a friend. He pushed the stand next to the bed. Amber reached out to touch the thick stalk of the plant.

"So how is it going?" he asked.

The small smile faded. "Like always. The same stupid questions, the same mumbo-jumbo. It's only been four days; it feels like four hundred years."

"Sorry. State law."

"I know. I'm not new to this, remember. I just don't know if I can stand another ninety-day session of it."

"You have before."

A muscle danced in her jaw, just under her left ear. "That's right, I have. For all the good it did." Her voice was suddenly cold.

It was the wrong thing for him to have said, he realized. All right. He wasn't perfect, everybody made mistakes. He'd have to back off and try something else.

"Remember that swim I asked about? Like to go?"

"How? The headsplitter told me I'd have to stay on this dope for another week."

"Maybe I can convince him you need exercise therapy. Get you sprung for a little while, at least. I can try."

"Why would you want to do that for me?"

Careful. This was a crucial point. "Because I like you."

"As a patient."

"As a person."

"Why the hell not? Anything would be better than this bed." Was there a hint of a lift in her voice?

It was a large pool. Quinn stood waiting for Amber to emerge from the dressing room. The smell of chlorine was sharp in the warm air; the slosh-slosh of the water slapping the sides and the echo-effect of the tile walls made sounds louder than normal.

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Suits were optional. Quinn never wore one. But when Amber walked toward him in all her youthful nudity, he wished he had decided to use a suit this time. She was lovely, slim and very attractive physically. She seemed unconscious of her nudity, as most young people were these days. Her file showed she had been sexually active since age thirteen. Very active.

He thought of snowstorms and ice; of the time he had almost drowned trying to swim across the frigid Columbia River when he was nineteen. She attracted him, and he did not want her to notice, not yet. He was still flaccid, but that could change very quickly.

He watched her give him a frank, appraising look. He definitely could not develop an erection now. "Shall we?" He turned toward the water.

She nodded. Her dive was clean, a shallow, flat racing slap. He followed.

After twenty minutes, he stopped and hung onto the side of the tiled overflow drain. She swam up next to him. "You're in pretty good shape for an old man," she said. She grinned.

"Thanks, granddaughter. Us old folks, we do try."

"Mr. Quinn—"

"Carl."

"Okay. Carl. Thanks for bringing me. You didn't have to."

He nodded and smiled back. Oh, but I did. I had to. And, despite his resolve, he felt a thrill, a warm rush as he looked at her. Such a lovely, lonely little girl. She didn't have anybody; she needed him.

He ducked under the water and slicked his hair back from his forehead. All right. He could give her what she needed without going over the edge this time. He didn't have to love her.

The next morning he stopped and waved at her from the doorway. "How goes the battle, Amber Alicia Delany?"

"So-so. Do you have a middle name?"

"Richard."

"So-so, Carl Richard Quinn. Yourself?"

"Could be worse."

"Going to visit for a few minutes? Keep the students away?"

"Hmm. I guess I can spare a few minutes. Just this once. Don't tell the 'splitter."

"I won't, I promise."

Two nights later: He opened the door quietly. The room was

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dark. He started to back out, but her voice drifted out of the darkness. "I'm not asleep."

"Well, you should be. It's past midnight."

"Why did you peek in on me?"

"No particular reason. Just happened to be passing by."

"At midnight?"

"A short cut to my apartment."

Silence for a few seconds. Then, "Thank you, Carl. It was a nice thing to do."

"No extra charge. All part of the service."

And a week later: "Why did you decide to become a psychiatric nurse?" she asked.

He shrugged. "The usual reasons. To help humanity. To make a living. To keep off the streets."

"No, really."

"Really? It's complex. And dull. You don't want to hear it."

"I do. Please."

"Um. All right. Skipping the complex part and getting right down to the bare bones of it, then. I got into this line because my mother killed herself."

"I'm sorry. If you'd rather not talk about it—"

"No problem. It was a long time ago. I was twenty. My father left her, right after I moved out on my own. I was an only child—she must have felt very deserted. Empty-nest syndrome. She felt unloved. I—I never told her I loved her enough, I guess. By the time I realized it, it was too late. An old story. So I drifted into what I'm doing now. Compensation, the texts call it. Guilt complex, a desire to make up for her death." He shifted on the chair and stared toward the rainy outside through the window. "It's actually a compulsion with me. I'm a professional do-gooder. I can't help it. Even knowing what it is doesn't help. People have to know somebody on this world cares for them, that's important. That's my particular cross to bear."

"That must be hard for you sometimes."

He bit at his lower lip. If only you knew, little one. Aloud, he said, "Sometimes. But somebody has to do it."

He would have said more, but he couldn't summon the desire. No, that wasn't it. It was the effort he couldn't summon.

And on the third Monday of her stay: "Amber, I'm going to be gone for a couple of days." God, he hated this part. It always hurt. Him. Them.

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Her look was like that of some small, frightened animal. "Where? How long?"

"A seminar. I have to log so many hours of CME—continuing medical education—credit each year to keep my license. I'll be back on Wednesday."

She looked very fragile, sitting there on one of the bedside chairs, her hands tightly clenched in her lap. She wore an old, faded-red robe he had brought for her.

"I've gotten kind of used to you being around, you know?"

"It'll only be two days." He had to force the words out.

"Sure." She twisted the cloth belt of the robe in both hands. "No big deal. I've got all the junior psychiatrists eager to learn. I'll get by." Her smile was tight; all lips and no eyes.

Why the hell did it have to be done like this? Sure, he knew the justification for it. All the graphs and curves and nomenclature. Optimal dependence factors; psychological retrenchment and expectation; transference and re-imprinting. It worked, usually. But dammit, it hurt them!

And it failed sometimes. Sometimes, they lost them. It wasn't a risk to be taken lightly. Quinn found he didn't want to take it with Amber. Damn!

There was a small touch he didn't have to add, but did. He walked over to her, bent, and kissed the top of her head. "You don't run off while I'm gone." He kept his hands cradling her face for a second. She looked up, and her eyes brimmed with tears.

"I won't." Her voice was tiny, hardly more than a whisper. "I promise."

He forced his hands away, made himself turn and walk away. It's for her good, he kept telling himself. Don't get into it, keep objective. You are getting too close to the edge again. Back off.

But that didn't make it any easier. Not at all.

He tossed the green-plastic package across the room. It bounced from the pastel wall and landed on the floor. Amber turned from the window at the sound.

This was it. He held his breath—

"Carl!"

"Well. I see you didn't run away while I was getting educated."

She took four quick steps toward him, then jumped. He reached out and caught her as she wrapped her arms around his neck and kissed him. He kissed back and it was not a fatherly action. Their tongues tangled and her hands clutched him tightly in sudden passion.

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Damn us all, he thought. He pushed her gently away. "You didn't even look to see what I brought you." He pointed at the small package on the floor. He noticed how much his hand shook as he pointed.

She released her hold. Took a deep breath. "Oh. Sure. Thanks." She picked up the green plastic bag and looked at it.

"Sunflower seeds?"

"My friend was out sunflowers. I thought you might want to grow your own."

She looked at Quinn, then back down at the bag in her hand. Another critical point. Was it too early? He found he was again holding his breath.

"Yes. I think I would like that."

He released the air softly through his lips.

"Of course, it's rather late in the season, unless you happen to own a hothouse. But spring isn't far off."

She smiled. "No. It isn't, is it?"

They stood quietly for a few seconds. Then, "Carl, I know this room is monitored when I'm alone. Can you figure out a way to shut it off?"

"Yes."

"Then shut it off tonight and come see me."

He sighed. "Amber—"

"Please?"

He knew what she wanted. God knew he wanted it, too. It was a big jump; she was ahead of schedule. But it also brought him closer to the moment he would have to fake it. He wasn't ready for that. Not yet.

Maybe not ever.

Eleven P.M. She met him at the door. She was dressed in a silk shortie gown—where had she gotten that?—which barely covered her anywhere. She stood on her toes and kissed him; it was a soft, lip-flowering touch, ever-so-gentle.

He held her shoulders. No need to pretend here; he wanted her. He pulled her to him, put one hand under her buttocks and lifted her clear of the floor. She wrapped her legs around his hips. They continued the kiss, harder and deeper, as he walked slowly toward the bed. He could feel the warmth of her pulsing against his body; smell the musk of her sex.

He gently lowered her to the bed. She arched her back as he stroked her body with his fingertips. He bent and kissed the salty wetness of her.

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"Oh, yes!"

They made love slowly, as if they had known each other for years. It went on for a long time.

Not long enough for Quinn, though, He knew what might follow.

"Carl. There's something I have to say."

"Don't. I know."

"But I have to say it."

Yes. He knew. He shifted slightly, to watch her face in the dim light from the window. She lifted herself from his outstretched arm and looked down. She traced his lips with her forefinger. "I love you. You are the only man who has ever really cared about me, as a person. You have saved my life."

Dear God, he thought. Just what kind of a man am I?

"It's not just this"—she rubbed her small hand over his tight belly, touched his groin—"though it's part of it. It's—"

"Hush," he said, stopping his words with his mouth over hers.

Now. It was time for the big lie, to cement it, to bind it all up with a too-solid tie. It would be easy for her to accept it because she wanted to hear it. He had been keeping her at arm's length. All he had to do was tell her; he could fake it.

He reached out to touch her face. She kissed the palm of his hand.

Dear God. He couldn't do it. He couldn't fake it. Because he realized that despite his intentions, regardless of what he had tried to do this time, there was no way.

Because it wasn't a lie. He was caught in the same trap he had laid for her. It welled over him like a giant wave; he couldn't fight the feeling. Damn. Oh, damn!

"Amber, dearest, how I do love you, too."

Quinn jerked aside the heavy folds of the shroud-chair and sucked in a deep breath of the fresher room air. He sat that way for fifteen seconds, then fell back. Not again. No!

He reached between his legs and disconnected the implanted IV shunt in his left femoral vein from the plastic in-feed line. While he was at it, he deflated the foley catheter balloon, then pulled the thick rubber tube from his body. He sat up again.

There was a different tech on duty, a small, black woman.

"January 2nd," she said, anticipating his question.

He nodded. He rubbed his right hand across his jaw, felt the bristles of a three-day beard. "I'm going to shave and shower. Then I'll be going to see her."

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The tech nodded. "You could wait and rest a little."
"No," he said. "No, I can't."

He was sitting by her bed when she awoke. Those blue, blue eyes fixed on him; a smile lit her face. "Carl. I must have fallen asleep. Are you all right? You look so pale."

Walking away from her for the two-day "seminar" had been bad. But this was the absolute worst. Nobody in the world could know what this felt like. Nobody.

"Amber." He touched her bare arm. Smoother than he remembered. Funny, it was usually the other way around. "I have to tell you something."

She blinked several times. "Carl? What is it? Is something wrong?" She sat up. The hospital gown seemed like a pale tent, compared to the nightgown she had worn.

"You were a three-time loser when you came in here this time, Amber. None of the treatments anybody had tried before kept you from trying to kill yourself again."

"That was before," she said.

"Yes. Only now, now there's a . . . new treatment. Less than a year old; we've only had it here for a few months. I—your problem was involved with love. You know all the psychiatric terms and gobble-gobble, I know.

"But what it all comes down to is simple: you felt unloved. Like my mother. Like others. No amount of therapy can cure that, no theory of psychological experimentation works, save one. You have to *know* you are loved, period."

"What is it you are trying to say, Carl?"

He sighed. "Listen. A long time ago, in England, some researchers developed a project, involving dart players. There were three groups of people in the test. Each group was checked on dart-playing abilities. Scores were noted.

"One group was sent home—the control group. One group then practiced throwing darts at a board for an hour or so a day. The other group went to the board, but only stood there, pretending to practice. They imagined they were throwing.

"At the end of the experiment, all three groups were tested again. The control group did about the same. The group that practiced had much higher scores.

"But the group that only pretended to practice also had much higher scores; in fact, they were little different from those of the actual-practice group." He stopped. He reached out and took her right hand in his. Her skin was cold.

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"Do you understand?"

"No. Are you trying to tell me you don't love me?"

"No. God help me, I love you. More than you know."

"I don't understand, then."

"Amber, it—it didn't really happen."

"What didn't happen?"

"I—there's a machine. It's called an Encephalocaster. It works on brainwaves. It—my job involves running the machine. With it, I can project . . . dreams. My consciousness can twine with another's; we can dream the same dream."

He took a deep breath, close to a sob, and continued. "For the last three days, we—you and I—we've been having a dream."

"No! I don't believe it!"

He squeezed her hand. "I'm sorry."

A long time seemed to pass. Finally, "It was all a lie." Her voice was a whisper.

"Oh, no. It wasn't a lie. You and I felt it together. We grew close, we learned to love each other. That part is true."

She began to cry, soundlessly. The tears dropped from her face to the sheet. "How—how can you *do* something like that?"

Quinn felt tears running down his own cheeks. "It's my job. It's what I do. It saves lives."

"You've done it before. Like—like some kind of—of——"

"—whore," he finished. "I can't blame you for feeling like that."

"But it was so *real!* I loved you!" She paused, caught her breath with a sob. "I—I—still love you." She clutched his hand, hard.

He looked away from her face, toward the window. "I wasn't going to let myself do it, this time," he said. "I tried not to, but I did it anyway. None of that part was a lie, Amber. I wanted it to be, but it wasn't. I do love you."

"So what happens now?"

"You go home. I—we gave you what you needed."

"What about us?"

He looked at her. "I'll see you as often as I can. We'll have as much time together as we can. But it won't be as much as either of us wants."

"Why? Even if it was only a dream, we can still—oh! Oh." Her eyes widened. "Of course. There are . . . others, aren't there? You've done this before. How many?"

"It doesn't matter."

"Oh, God. You feel responsible for them, too. How awful for you. How many?"

He rubbed at his eyes. "Eleven. Eight women and three men."

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"And what we went through together, you went through with each of them?"

"Yes."

"And you—you—"

"—love them all. Yes. I do."

She hugged him to her. His body shook with sobs as he clutched her. "And there's not enough time," he said. "Never enough time."

How long they sat there that way he could not tell; hours, months, centuries, eons. But she was going to be all right. They had something. It wasn't much, only a small thing, but it was something. More than she'd ever had before. It would be enough, he hoped. It had been so far, for the others. *For them.*

He found himself alone, standing and staring through a barred window at the cold and rainy afternoon. A wind rattled against the building, after passing among the tall evergreen trees on the hospital grounds. A soulless wind from some barren, far place.

He pressed his hands against the bars, feeling the smoothness of the thin steel slats. For a second, he imagined himself lunging against the bars, breaking through them, in a shower of sharp glass fragments and torn flesh, to tumble to the concrete below.

Damn! He *loved* her! It wasn't right, it hurt, it *hurt!* His breath came in short and quiet sobs and the tears were harder and deeper, now that she was gone. *Gone.*

He shook his head. He'd see her again. Like he saw them all. A few minutes, an hour, an afternoon. It wasn't enough! He loved them all . . . but he couldn't *be* with them all. Damn, oh, *damn!* He'd saved her—but lost another piece of himself. As he had before. As he would again.

Why? Why? It was always this way, it was always the twisted gut and the hollow feeling. He couldn't make them love him without loving them, too.

"Amber . . ." The thin whisper slid through the bars and fogged the glass. Oh, what a perverse and terrible dance it was! Why?

A pale reflection stared back at him from the cold glass behind the bars. Because this was the way the game had to be played, the reflection seemed to say.

As Carl turned away from the window, he knew it was true. Now, there was Amber.

Later, there would be others.

He would love them, too.

He had to. ●

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(From page 23)

SOLUTION TO FLARP FLIPS A FIVER

Coins won't spin on a rotating spaceship. The inertial forces of a spinning coin make it behave like a small gyroscope. It preserves the orientation of its axis relative to the stars, just as the earth (a huge gyroscope) keeps one end of its axis pointing toward the north star. Because the torus-shaped ship rotates around an axis perpendicular to that of the spinning coin, the coin at once falls over.

Even a flipped coin would behave peculiarly unless its spin axis paralleled that of the ship. A ballet dancer on such a ship would be unable to execute pirouettes. Jugglers could not twirl plates on sticks or balls on their fingers. Yo-yos and tossed Frisbees would act strangely. Tops would not stay upright. Devices that rotated around vertical axes (overhead fans, turntables, flywheels) would have to be designed to overcome strong forces of torsion and friction. Machine parts that spun on horizontal axes would have to be carefully aligned to keep them stable. (The outside rim of the ship is of course the floor, so "vertical" here means pointing toward the center of the toroidal ship's "hole.")

This leads to an interesting paradox. According to relativity theory, there is no such thing as absolute motion. There is only motion relative to a fixed inertial frame of reference. In relativity theory, either the ship or the cosmos can be taken as the fixed frame without violating any natural laws. But if the ship is assumed to be unmoving, and the cosmos is regarded as rotating around it, how can you explain the eccentric behavior of the spinning fiver? Come to think of it, how can you explain the ship's artificial gravity? Would not the inertial field prove that the ship actually rotated, not the cosmos?

If this were the case, general relativity could never have been formulated as a consistent theory. How does Einstein's theory escape from this seeming paradox?

Turn to page 103 for the solution.

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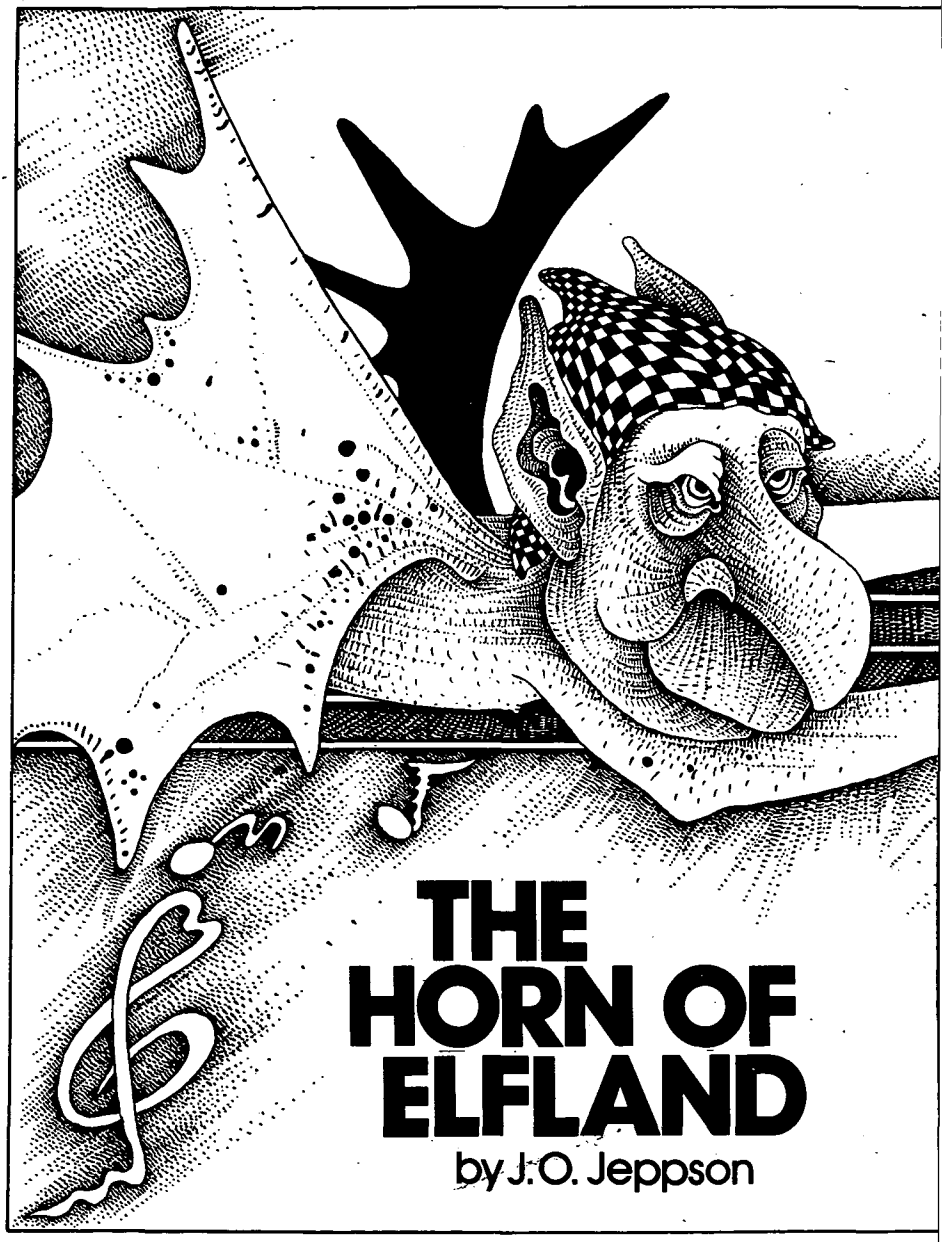

THE HORN OF ELFLAND

by J.O. Jeppson

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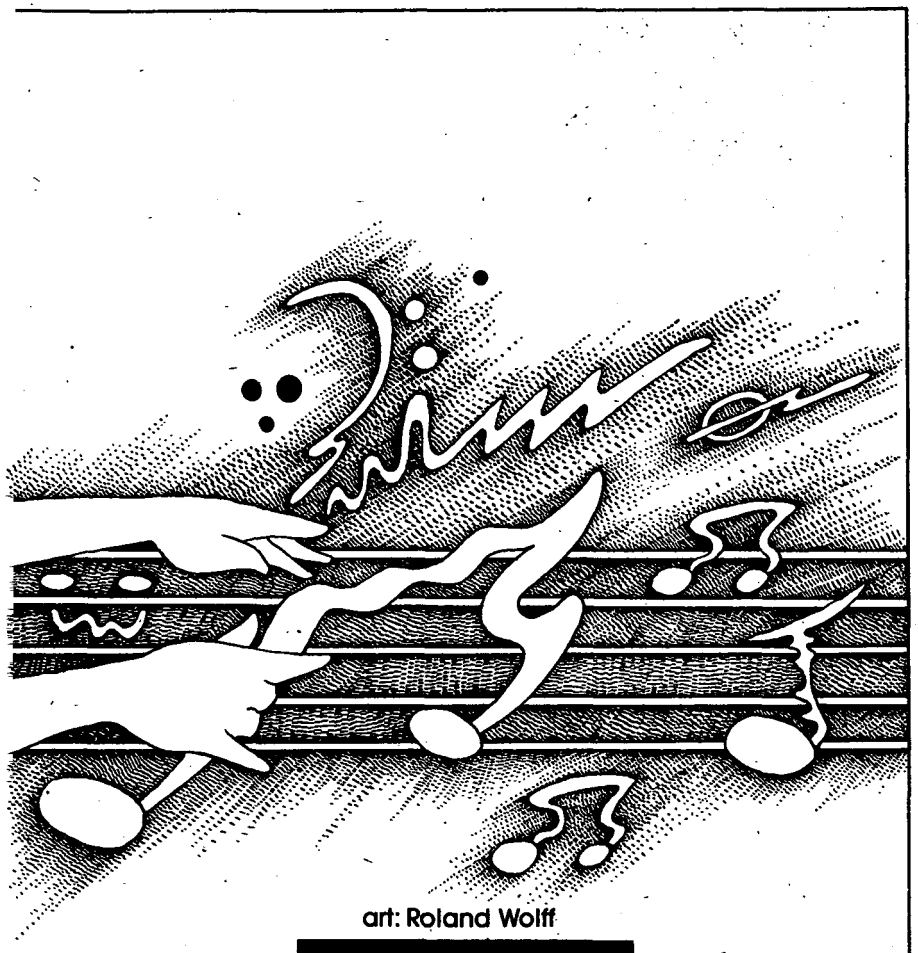

art: Roland Wolff

Here Dr. Jeppson, a psychiatrist herself, presents another history from the casebooks of Pshrinks Anonymous.

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One of the Interpersonal members of the Psychoanalytic Alliance put a plastic container on the lunch table and said, "I have brought blueberries for dessert, to celebrate the Horn of Elfland faintly blowing."

Startled, the other members of Pshrinks Anonymous stopped trying to dissect Stressed Squab without spilling Primal Peas off their plates. "How did you get blueberries in mid-winter?" asked a Pshrink.

"Don't you mean *horns* of elfland?" asked a literary Pshrink.

"No, she doesn't," said the Oldest Member, "and wherever you got those berries, m'dear, they will go well with these cookies I brought to thank you for giving me your Philharmonic ticket in the emergency."

"Chocolate-chocolate chip!" said the Interpersonal. "Food being the music of love . . ."

"I disapprove of all these misquotations," said the literary Pshrink, "as well as the references to food."

"Silence!" said the Oldest Member. "I intend to tell a story about music."

"Perhaps it will be a story with Zen implications," said the Interpersonal.

"Don't be ridiculous," said the Oldest Member, staring at her with heavy suspicion.

She seemed to be meditating on a cookie. "When I'm eating, I eat. When I'm listening to music . . ."

"That will do," said the Oldest Member.

Last week [he said] I received a call from my internist, who is not only one of my oldest colleagues but someone upon whom I depend heavily since—you will be astonished to learn this—I find it incredibly difficult to acquire a reliable authority figure at my age, much less another M.D. who isn't a complete ass. My internist doesn't quite measure up, but he's the best I know, so I'm always willing to help him out when I can. His problem was his ne'er-do-well grandson, now about thirty, who seemed to be in urgent need of psychiatric attention.

I reminded my internist that his grandson was obviously not suitable for classical Freudian analysis, my specialty, but that I would consent to doing a few emergency consultations.

When I saw the patient, last Thursday morning, he proved to be a short, energetic chap with a sparse brown beard and a wild look in his eyes.

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"Hullo," he said, sitting down on my couch. "I suppose grandpops has told you his diagnosis—that I'm crazy and that I've wasted my life trying to find myself. I suppose I have. I've tried finding myself in graduate schools, business, hard labor, and what grandpops calls idleness, but mostly I live on money left in trust for me by my other grandfather, and I pursue my three main interests—music, gourmet food, and Tolkien, not necessarily in that order."

Since I wasn't doing analysis, I questioned him, to speed things up. El, as I will call him, could play guitar and piano well enough to earn money with them, but had never tried. He was such a good cook that his one experiment with marriage had ended when his wife (a busy lawyer) complained that he was more interested in heating up the oven than her.

His obsession with Tolkien took the form of a preoccupation with *The Lord of the Rings* that was getting so out of hand it had certainly passed beyond the bounds of respectable neurosis.

El believed—believes—that Elves exist.

"Grandpops thinks it's insane," said El, waving his naked toes back and forth from his perch on my couch. Although it is winter, he was in sandals. Perhaps he expected fur to sprout from his feet.

"It's true," continued El, "that I may have been a trifle overenthusiastic when I changed my name to Elrond—say, do you know what I'm talking about? Do you realize that I'm referring not to little pixie-like creatures in silly stories, but to *Elves*, those tall, majestic, more-than-human creatures of Tolkien's masterpiece?"

"And you believe you are one of them?"

"Hell, no. I just believe there's a real place, inhabited by Elves, which can be entered by transcending the boundaries of this dimension. Tolkien unconsciously divined the truth, that there's another universe, in another dimension, where Elves live, making potent music and eating beautiful food. I'll go there with the ring."

He paused and chuckled as if he knew he'd titillated me.

"Ring?"

"Tolkien was wrong, you know. It's not the sort of ring he described. It's a ring of music. True power comes from completing the sequence of proper vibrations, closing that ring and pushing us into the other dimension. I'm a little worried, however, about what it will do to Avery Fisher Hall."

I raised my eyebrows inquiringly. They always have notable effect.

"An earthquake will swallow up the building," he said, "but I'm going to the concerts anyhow. All of them—Thursday, Saturday, Tuesday nights and Friday afternoon. Something is bound to hap-

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pen, because they're playing Pinkton's Seminal Seriatum."

"Whose what?"

"Serial music!"

"Cereal as in breakfast?" I asked. For some odd reason, food was on my mind.

"Serial music as in mathematical series, the major themes fitting a chosen form using a carefully constructed pattern of the twelve pitch classes of the equal tempered scale, intervals arranged in rows creating harmonic succession or hinting at harmonic possibilities that may or may not be fulfilled. The seriality of the piece may include timbre, rhythm, pitch—and Pinkton's will overdo the resonance properties of Fisher Hall."

"Oh?"

"The arrangements of lights over the stage, in particular, will no doubt respond when the serial music builds up resonance, in the metal lamps, shaped like more rounded oriental brass bells. Each row of lights has a different arrangement of balanced numbers—five-seven-seven-five in the first row at the edge of the stage ceiling, four-twelve-four in the next row, three-six-three in the next, and twenty-four straight across in the last row. Similarly balanced but totally different grouped numbers of lights are in rows over the audience, but it's the hot ones over the stage that will react."

I was skeptical, to say the least. Perhaps my expression—although ordinarily I am the most poker-faced of Freudians—revealed my opinion, because El scowled and suddenly slapped his hands on his thighs.

"You might *try* to believe me! I know what I'm talking about! When I first saw Avery Fisher Hall after it was rebuilt inside a few years ago, I was fascinated by the possibilities. That's when I started attending as many concerts as I could. I decided at first that the repetitive *dah-dah-dah-DAH* in Beethoven's Fifth would produce interesting effects, or perhaps something Baroque and contrapuntal would, but no. I turned to more modern stuff, but only when the most serial of serial music was performed did I begin to be certain that eventually there would be the ideal composition to make Fisher Hall enter another dimension."

"And you expect to find superhuman beings? Perhaps your problems with your father—an unresolved Oedipus complex—and with subsequent male authorities . . ."

"Bosh," said El. Actually, that was not exactly what he said, but at lunchtime I will bowdlerize his speech a trifle.

"Have you met this Pinkton?" I asked, feeling that El was still in

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search of a father figure more suitable than his own father or, heaven forfend, his grandfather.

"Pinkton's a young punk of twenty-five who lives in Boston and has nothing to do with this except that he wrote it. He may be a modern musical genius, but I'm sure he has no idea what his mathematical build-up of sound will do to the world."

"What do you mean, build-up?"

"That's the whole point. The particular composition to be played tonight builds up tonality and amplitude, with increasing dissonance, until the sound becomes unbearable for most people—and just at that moment it softens, and a door at the side of the stage opens. In the darkness beyond there is an extra French horn player hired for the purpose. We won't be able to see him, but suddenly we'll hear what seems to be an incredibly sweet note, like the faraway sound of an Elven horn."

I don't know what made me do it. Most unanalytic. I found myself muttering, out loud, "Blow, bugle, blow . . ."

"That's right," said El, obviously pleased. "Tennyson described it perfectly. Wild echoes flying out into the auditorium, sweet and clear, as if from afar. Not a real bugle, not even a trumpet, because only the French horn of all the brasses can sound that sweet, that sad, that mellow—the whole irony of Pinkton's masterpiece."

"I don't understand."

"You wouldn't, unless you go to the concert. Remember, now, the audience has been barraged with the build-up of unpleasant serial music, then reprieved, and then seduced by the off-stage horn into thinking they'll be soothed and relaxed. What happens then is sheer genius. The horn immediately peaks upward into incredible dissonance."

"I don't understand how one horn can create . . ."

"Remember that the rest of the orchestra, onstage, is still playing dissonantly but softly enough so that the audience believes that everything's going to be harmonic and beautiful eventually. The horn offstage adds its sound as if to sweeten while joining the orchestra, but all at once it interrupts the mathematically precise configuration with another kind of dissonant note that sets teeth on edge, forcing the seriality of the music into fever. The orchestra goes wild and the whole thing ends in a blast."

"Sounds awful."

"I love it. I've heard it in Boston and Philadelphia, but none of those places has the right kind of hall. Fisher has a mysterious seriality built into the metal light fixtures."

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"I still don't understand. What does that one French horn do that could possibly cause an earthquake?"

"Before it, there's an incredible build-up of tension, in people as well as in metal, and I believe the tension increases precisely because people are then deluded into expecting relief. When the horn's unexpectedly cruel dissonance occurs, that will complete the ring of powerful sound waves and electromagnetic waves and possibly psi waves, and that dissonance will push us into Middle Earth or whatever the place is called in the other dimension. Possibly only with a minor earthquake."

"That will happen tonight?"

"Anytime the Seminal Seriatum is played in Fisher Hall. I'm convinced that the first sign will be some electrical phenomenon, possibly a light exploding, just before the earthquake."

I was having trouble controlling my sarcasm. "I suppose you've calculated whether or not it matters if the lights in the ceiling are on or off?"

"Of course. During the concert, only certain dimmed lights are left on over the audience, but those over the musicians are bright and hot. All the lights are lit in a balanced pattern, so that if one light goes, the pattern will be upset, starting to unravel our ties to this dimension. . . ."

He went on like this for some time, discoursing as well on Tolkien's brilliance in tuning himself to the universe of Middle Earth, although—said El—Tolkien had been led astray by his preoccupation with language when he should have been concentrating on the music of the Elves, a music that may be drawing us to the other dimension just as we are pushed by the dissonance in this.

I could get nowhere with any sort of regular psychiatric interview, but El did promise to return the next morning, Friday.

When he showed up, late, his depression and anxiety would have been obvious even to a non-Freudian.

"I've been too upset to eat," he said. "Perhaps I should have counted the studs."

"The *what?*"

"The studs in the stage walls and ceiling—eight in the side panels, I think six in each ceiling one. Yet perhaps they don't matter. If I start trying to include the vibration tendencies of that metal, I suppose I should include the steel beams in the building proper and the metal in the chair seats, too."

"Are you trying to tell me that nothing happened?"

"And I forgot about metal in eyeglasses, jewelry, dental fillings,

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watches—my God, watches, ticking away, disrupting the seriality of the piece subliminally! And what about battery watches like my Accutron, adding a ghost of a hum. And piano wires! Oh hell, I forgot about the metal in the stage machinery to raise and lower the piano! And kettledrums are the worst . . . What am I saying? This is crazy!"

I was glad he thought something was. I had begun to worry about an out-of-control manic excitement, an obvious diagnosis even if he had not begun to neglect his food intake, which makes it worse. I remembered that my wife had put a bag of cookies in my briefcase when I left home that morning, but to give a patient food! It is almost unthinkable for a Pshrink of my persuasion. Perhaps it would be unnecessary now that he was beginning to show a slight degree of insight into his own pathology.

"That's right!" he shouted. "I'm crazy to consider all the other kinds of metal, even the kettledrums. After all, tympani are tuned to different pitches, while those lights are in mathematical sequence like the music, each light identical to the others, the lighted ones warm and the unlighted ones cold."

"Since nothing happened last night, why do you persist in believing that something will?" I asked, rummaging in my briefcase.

"I wasn't quite accurate. What I wanted—I mean, what I expected to happen didn't. There was no earthquake. We didn't get to the other dimension, but at the height of the serial music, when the offstage horn came in with that incredibly dissonant addition to the rest of the blast, I'd swear that the wires for those three suspended microphones began to vibrate. All we need is for that inexperienced guest conductor to play the thing *right* next time. You'll see. The world will see!" El laughed maniacally.

"Have a cookie," I said.

He grabbed it. "Thanks. I seem to be hungry after all. It's so depressing. Last night I didn't sleep, because I kept thinking that I was wrong."

"About the whole idea of Elfland?"

"Oh, no. That exists—somewhere. What I may be wrong about is the Pinkton. Maybe it won't send us to where I can hear Elvish music and eat Elvish food."

He finished the cookie. "The right kind of food is important to adjust our physiology to higher planes of existence, and music will keep it there. Maybe by mistake Pinkton's music, if played *right,* is exactly the wrong music. I'm afraid—all those people sitting in Avery Fisher Hall with non-Elvish food in them and listening to music that perhaps isn't Elvish—I'm afraid! So afraid!"

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"Afraid of what?"

"Being sent to Mordor, of course! All in Avery Fisher Hall . . ."

"Have another cookie," I said.

"They're good cookies, but I can make them better," he said. "Did you know that I'm a good gourmet cook? I've been trying new combinations of spices and other ingredients, creating food fit for Elves, but my conservative family disapproves."

"What about Mordor?"

His face creased as if he were going to cry. "During the music last night, watching the microphone wires sway, I thought all at once about what New York is like, about what the world is like, and now I fear we won't transcend the limitations of this universe and enter another, better one. Perhaps Tolkien combined the two possible other dimensions, better known in primitive thought as heaven and hell, and Mordor is hell. Perhaps we'll go there when the music succeeds."

"But . . ."

"Gee, grandpops says you're a Freudian. I thought you guys aren't supposed to keep making interrupting noises."

I said nothing. I did not tell him that I may have caught the disease from certain colleagues in the other camp. [The O.M. cocked one eyebrow at the Interpersonal.]

"Maybe," El continued, in a sadder tone, "that's why so many people walked out during the Pinkton, the last thing played. I know that Philharmonic audiences have a tendency to dribble out early to catch trains to whatever posh suburbs they came from, but this was almost a stampede. It's possible that's why the Pinkton didn't work."

"Couldn't it be that serial music is not to everyone's taste?"

"Most of it is harmonious and dull," said El, "but this Pinkton is an exception. Yet, if it does work, and . . . and . . . then Mordor! I don't think I could stand that. Yet it's so logical. Perhaps the opening to Mordor is created here in this dimension by the intricacies of carefully structured dissonance."

"That's the way it sounds," I said drily.

"You've heard Pinkton!"

"Ah, no, but . . ."

"Then you've got to go to one of the concerts. Go tomorrow. Get a ticket from somebody or try at the box office. Usually subscription holders who can't use their tickets call up so the box office can resell their seats. Please go. My grandfather is so angry with me. I've always been such a failure. I'd like one of his friends to be there

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when I prove myself." With that, he ran out of my office.

I decided that I had better go to the concert as a favor to my internist. You [he nodded politely to the Interpersonal] were kind enough to give me your subscription ticket to the Friday matinee concert, and I went.

Unfortunately I was sitting in the third tier, as far up as you can get, controlling my slight tendency to agoraphobia, when the concert finally ended with markedly subdued clapping for the horrendous Pinkton thing. Perhaps the audience, what was left of it after the predictable exodus, was too shell-shocked to hiss.

Suddenly I saw El weaving his way through the exiting crowd, and before I realized what was happening, he was up on the stage just as the conductor was taking his first bow after the Pinkton.

"Play it again!" shouted El. Then he turned crimson and ran over to the conductor to whisper in his ear. Some in the audience tittered, but they did not stop their determined march out to the lobby. Talking earnestly, El wouldn't let go of the conductor's arm.

The concertmaster stepped up to the conductor's box and helped the conductor march El out to the wings. After a minute, while the applause died away completely, they came back without him. Another smattering of applause, clearly for politeness, was all the audience would give, and that was the end of the concert.

By the time I got down to the stage level—the elevators work slowly in Avery Fisher Hall, and I am too old to run down all those flights of stairs—the backstage guards had taken El to Bellevue Psycho for observation.

Yes, I see by your faces that you read about it in one of the daily papers—not the *Times*, of course. El gave a phony name to everyone, so no one realized for a while that he was my patient. It wasn't until Sunday morning that he was released in my custody.

In the meantime, the Saturday night concert went off without a hitch and without El's presence. He was chastened and depressed, and he promised all of us, including his angry grandfather, that he would behave himself.

"I suppose that means I can't buy an air pistol and shoot out one of the lights when the offstage horn plays." he said.

He was clearly in need of long-term treatment.

After being sheltered in the bosom of his family the rest of Sunday and Monday, on Tuesday morning he came for another office visit with me. He seemed agitated again.

"I've just realized that someone must warn people with pacemakers not to listen to the Seminal Seriatum," said El, still obsessed.

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"When the damn music is played properly—and I don't believe it has been so far—then not only will we go to Mordor, but the electronic vibrations will louse up pacemakers. At least I think so. Did you know that grandpops has one?"

"No," I said, unaccountably troubled. My own internist—a man my age—with a pacemaker! I have always felt in my prime. Now I began to have doubts. Mordor indeed!

"And I've been wrong about the lights," said El, pulling at his beard. "I thought the hot ones over the stage were the ones that counted, but maybe the others over the audience are important, especially the first row nearest the stage—six and twenty-six and six. Do you think the rows with even numbers in the sets are more likely to be affected than the rows with odd numbers?"

It was hopeless. I could not get him to concentrate on anything but Avery Fisher Hall and Pinkton. I regretted not bringing more cookies, and I was afraid that if he went through with his plan to go to the last concert, that night, he would have such a psychotic episode that he would not recover for a long time. I was completely unsuccessful in persuading him to stay home, but he did promise to sit still and leave quietly no matter what happened. He persuaded me *not* to go, and to trust him.

It's a good thing that our Psychoanalytic Alliance luncheon was on Wednesday this week, because I felt like describing this case, which has, after all, turned out well. My patient came to an early morning session today and seemed considerably improved. He even brought me a present.

"After the concert last night I stayed up late and made these cookies," he said as he walked into the room. He seemed different—somehow taller, even handsome, certainly poised and calm. His grandfather must have revealed to him my penchant for chocolate-chocolate chip cookies.

"What happened at the concert?" I couldn't help asking. I had spent a restless night worrying about him, when I should have been reviewing the psychodynamics of the case and deciding on the appropriate psychoanalytic formulation.

"I guess I was wrong about the Pinkton," said El. "I should have known that in spite of the theoretical plausibility, in actuality it's impossible for any orchestra to play the music so perfectly that the proper resonance affects the light fixtures and sets up the conditions for entering another dimension. On top of that, the horn player was completely off last night."

There was a pause, and El shrugged. "It's funny, but the other

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dimension doesn't matter much any more. Maybe I've accepted that we're all stuck in this one and I intend to make the best of it. It's odd, but while listening to the Seriatum I had a brilliant idea. I'm going to open a restaurant. Grandpops says he'll give me the money."

"Then . . ."

"I thought of calling it Elrond's Way, but there might be copyright difficulties, so I'll think of something else. I'll serve the gourmet recipes I invented while trying to discover Elvish food, and I'll have a music and light show every night—modern music and maybe computer graphics in color, projected on a large screen. I think I've finally found"—he winked at me—"my s—elf."

So you see, my fellow Pshrinks, that while El is still quite crazy, he has transformed some of it into a possibly worthwhile endeavor. I, for one, intend to go to his restaurant, although I doubt if I'll stay for the music. Have one of his cookies, and I think you'll understand.

The Oldest Member stopped talking and passed around the bag of cookies.

"Best I ever ate," said several Pshrinks.

"Terrific," said the Interpersonal. "They go well with my blueberries."

"For someone who never gets fat," said the O.M. enviously, "You have always been notably interested in food."

"And in the endings of stories."

"I've told you how it ended."

"You don't know the rest of the story. I went to the concert last night."

"But your ticket was for Friday afternoon, and you gave it to me."

"I got one at the last minute at the box office. I was curious. Your patient was wrong. Something did happen."

"All right, all right. I didn't suppose I could tell a case history without your being involved in some way," said the Oldest Member. "Tell us."

"Well," said the Interpersonal through a cookie, "I was sitting not in my regular seat in the third tier but in the lower middle section of the orchestra seats. I could see the stage lights quite well. When the Pinkton horror was played, the offstage horn does at first sound as if it were out in Elfland, promising a ring of happiness."

"Happiness?" said the O.M. "I heard it, and as El said, the horn only tempts you to think that, just before it triggers off that God-awful cacophony in the orchestra."

The Interpersonal shook her head. "Last night when the horn

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player was supposed to switch to dissonance, the note cracked—French horns can do that even with the best players—and instead of a horrible clashing sound, we heard . . ."

"What?" asked the Oldest Member as the Interpersonal stopped speaking and stared into nothingness.

"Um. It was just as one of the lights in the stage ceiling winked out. I forgot to count exactly where it was, not being very mathematical, and of course the orchestra did eventually go on to finish the damn piece but it was ruined as far as the expected effect . . ."

"What happened?" shouted the Oldest Member.

"And afterward, I noticed that everyone around me looked a little paler and rather tense . . ."

"At this rate," said the Oldest Member, "I will need a pacemaker myself. If you don't tell us what happened . . ."

"Oh, yes. You see, the cracked note, instead of being the one that produced the worst dissonance, did just the opposite. After what we'd been subjected to, that note sounded as if the promise of happiness had been kept. We didn't move into Elfland. It came in to us. Perhaps the horn player, fed up with Mordor, did it on purpose."

"I suppose you had an extraordinary experience, as usual."

The Interpersonal grinned. "I was sitting on the slope of a mountain eating sun-warmed blueberries that grew wild all around me. The little boy in front of me turned to his mother and said, loudly, as soon as the music ended, 'I was on the space shuttle, having a great time and eating watermelon. I could taste it. I was *really there*. Where were you, Mommy?"

"Now you can't expect us to believe . . ."

"Fortunately his mother had slept through most of the last part of the concert, so she was able to say confidently, 'You're always imagining things too much, dear.' Everyone around me sighed, obviously with relief, and we all left Avery Fisher Hall, which was still completely intact."

"I suppose," said the Oldest Member with resignation, "that you're going to say food comes into it because it's a more primitive experience, and what happened was some sort of right brain activity induced by the amplification of vibrations in the electromagnetic fields of the neurons?"

"Well . . ."

"And I know what you're like. You'll insist that El's partial cure was in surrendering to his better self in response to my concern, and that I handled the case well because I was more interpersonally active."

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"Um," said the Interpersonal, taking another cookie and pouring milk on her blueberries.

"And now you're probably going to pontificate about how we Pshrinks overdo the seeking out of internal pathology, as if the human mind contained only Mordor, when we should be helping the patient find in himself what's true and noble and . . ."

"Elvish?" said the Interpersonal.

"I knew it!" said the Oldest Member triumphantly.

"Well, I . . ."

"Furthermore," said the Oldest Member, scowling, "you will now undoubtedly insist on ending with some impenetrably obscure Zen remark that you think illuminates the mystery of life."

"Enjoy your blueberries," said the Interpersonal. ●

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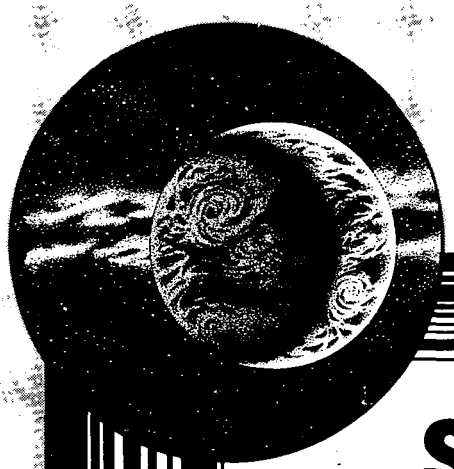

SEEING BENEATH

There is an agony in fishing
river, lake, or brook,
if only of the spirit;
it is the waiting, for wishful
and ultimately serious,
we fancy other universes,
where hunger never spies the hook
and imagination has a worldly limit.

You cast: a cosmic symbol
passes through another galaxy,
calculated for discovery
of an eager, recognizing populace.
Your vision plots specific order
in logical accordance
with barometer, depth and cover.
And waits. And waits.
And wishes battle.

—M. G. Jacobs

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(From page 87)

SECOND SOLUTION TO FLARP FLIPS A FIVER

According to general relativity, the force field inside a rotating spaceship can be regarded as either inertial or gravitational depending on what you choose as your frame of reference. If you make the universe the fixed frame, the field is called inertial. If you make the ship the fixed frame, the cosmos that rotates around it generates a gravity field inside the ship that is indistinguishable from the inertial field of the other interpretation. In this sense, gravity inside the *Bagel* is genuine gravity, not simulated, even though the structure of its field is not the same as that of a gravitational field surrounding a planet or a star.

Strictly speaking, one should not say that the field is caused either by a rotating ship or by a rotating cosmos. The fundamental reality is the *relative* rotation of ship and cosmos. This relative motion creates the force field that simulates earth's gravity and topples spinning tops. The question of which *really* rotates, ship or universe, is as meaningless as asking whether you are really sitting on top of a chair while you read these lines or whether the chair is supporting you from below.

Einstein used the phrase "principle of equivalence" to stand for the fundamental identity of inertia and gravity. In general relativity they are two names for essentially the same force. The name used depends on the choice of a reference frame. In the case of a rotating spaceship it is much simpler to assume that the universe is fixed and that the ship's spin produces an inertial field. But if the ship is taken as fixed, the rotating universe can be thought of as causing a gravity field that tugs on the spaceship from all directions.

In either interpretation the tensor equations are the same and the field has exactly the same structure. It is not yet known whether the field results from rotation relative to the structure of spacetime itself, or relative to the masses of the stars. The second hypothesis is known as Mach's principle. Einstein favored it for a time, then later abandoned it, and experts today are divided on the matter.

Presumably gravity (or inertia) is transmitted by waves that are quantized. The carrying particle has been called a graviton, but neither gravity waves nor particles have yet been detected by replicable experiments.

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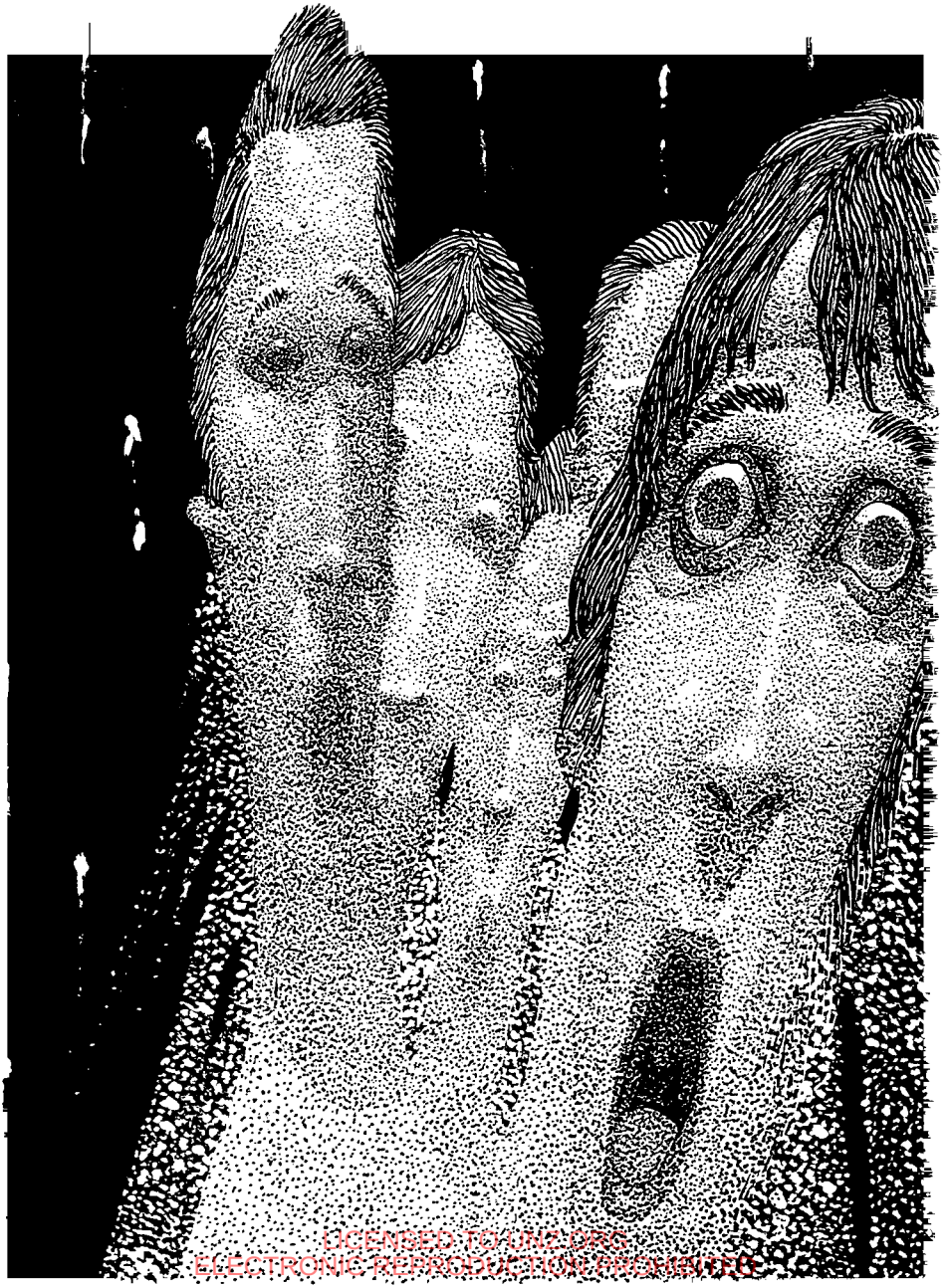

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THE FALLING

by Pamela Sargent & George Zebrowski

Pamela Sargent is the author of the novels *Cloned Lives* (Fawcett), *The Sudden Star* (Fawcett), *Watchstar* (Pocket), and *The Golden Space* (Timescape). George Zebrowski's most recent novel is *Macrolife* (Avon), and Borgo Press is preparing to publish a book about his work. This is their first appearance in *IAsfm*.

art: Janet Aulisio

She was sinking, caught in a familiar dream of flight, falling endlessly toward the ground.

Waking with a start, she stared at the ceiling and noticed again that one of the white ceiling tiles was curving at one corner, drooping ever so slightly toward the floor. That tile had always drooped, and she was still falling. Her stomach was pressing against her spine and the bed threatened to sink into the floor.

Elaine sat up, carefully putting her feet on the carpet. The sensation was still there. The whole building was sinking. Shoddy construction, she thought; shifting sand. She padded sluggishly to the window and pulled the curtain aside.

She was still five floors up; the green grass and parking lot below were exactly where they should have been. The fifth-floor windows of the condominium complex across the road still glittered with the morning sunlight, beaming the gleam at her window.

Turning away, she made her way to the bathroom, washed up, and then struggled back to the bedroom to dress. Each foot seemed to sink as she set it down; she lifted her knees high, feeling as though she was walking through mud. Her skirt pulled at her hips and her jacket semed oddly heavy for a garment made out

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of cotton. She took a deep breath. She had to get out and get some air.

A larger crowd than usual was waiting by the elevator; a few people were still in bathrobes and pajamas. "Hey, Elaine," one neighbor yelled.

She raised one arm in greeting, then let it fall to her side. She did not want to take the elevator anyway; she could sink without it. She went down the stairs clinging to the railing, feeling as if she were on an escalator and wondering why she could not force herself to move more quickly.

A crowd had gathered on the lawn; several pairs of anxious eyes surveyed the building. "It's sinking," someone said.

"It isn't." Elaine waved a hand at the tiers of balconies and windows, which were still where they belonged.

'Something is."

She turned toward the speaker and recognized Bill Weinstein. "You feel it, too?"

"Everyone does." Bill was rubbing his chin so hard that she thought he would remove his tennis-player's tan. His wide shoulders slumped uncharacteristically. "I could barely get up."

Elaine suddenly had to sit down, and plopped onto the lawn. Others were already seated. Every building nearby had clusters of people gathering below on meager squares of grass, tennis courts, and at curbside. Few cars were passing—odd for that time of day. She looked down, feeling the ground sinking away beneath her. After staring at the grass for a long moment, she rose, brushing dirt from her skirt, wondering what the green and yellow blades were hiding.

"I can't do anything here," she said. "I'd better get over to the Center."

Bill frowned. "You're going to work?"

"Might as well. I can't afford to miss a day now, not with—" Elaine paused. The opportunity she had been waiting for all this time seemed to be sinking away, along with everything else.

The sinking feeling traveled with Elaine across the causeway and to the Center's parking lot. Her knees shook as she got out of the car; her stomach was queasy. The air seemed thick and heavy. She looked at her watch; she had made the trip in twenty minutes, as usual, though it had seemed to take much longer.

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George Rolfe was sitting in her office. "We're sinking," Elaine said, and tried to laugh.

George's drooping eyelids made his brown eyes look mournful. "Down, down, down," he said, and cackled. "We're being flushed away." Elaine imagined a whirlpool and the room seemed to spin, pulling her down.

"What's going on?"

"I don't know. It seems to be happening everywhere. You explain it."

She sat down, falling into the chair behind her desk with a thump. "How the hell am I supposed to explain it?"

"You're the psychologist, Elaine. It's a perceptual problem, a mass delusion. It has to be. There isn't any indication on any objective measuring device that shows any difference. That means it's in our minds."

"That means I won't be able to go." She was suddenly angry. "I've been waiting and waiting." Gravity had won; it was pulling at her, as if to register its triumph. She would not leave Earth; she would not get the chance to study the behavior of those in the spacelab. She would be pulled back into the mental morass of this world.

"How can you think about that now?" George's mouth sagged as he frowned; he glanced at her as if trying to decide whether to say any more. "I talked to them this morning. They feel it, too. It isn't just happening down here."

Elaine gripped the arms of the chair, seeing her chance. "Then it's even more important for me to go. I can see how it's affecting them."

"How can you think about that now?" George repeated. "Think of what you can do here. How is this going to affect people? Why do we all feel it? You have quite a fertile field for study."

She knew he was right. But she did not want to stay.

As Elaine rose, her family seemed to sink. A scholarship had taken her out of the small valley town where she had grown up; her degrees had placed her on a pedestal, from which she could descend only with difficulty. Objectively, she had measured the degree of her alienation from those she had once loved while her father ranted about book-learning and people who got above themselves. She had watched as his coffin was lowered into the ground, and had never returned to the valley after that, the valley on the banks of two rivers which had cut their way through the surrounding hills.

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She was falling. She stood on her balcony, looking down at the lawn. People were curled like shrimps in bedding and sleeping bags, afraid to stay inside. A television reporter and cameraman wandered among them, sinking even as they spoke to one group. Everything was sinking more rapidly, yet the air remained still and the railing steady. The absence of any visual sign of the falling was giving her vertigo.

Elaine turned away and went back inside. She was alone, as she usually was in the evening, having developed that habit during the years of consultations with the deluded and the unhappy. The ceiling stretched out above her, and she had the feeling that it was about to collapse, cover her in rubble. She was trapped in a room which would grow smaller, pressing her down to the floor as the walls slowly crushed her.

The telephone rang, shattering the illusion. She hurried to the bedroom and picked it up. "Hello?"

It was George. "Did you see the evening news?"

"No, I usually watch the late news. What is it?"

"It's out. Some astronomer at Cambridge leaked it. Some of the nearer stars have shifted position ever so slightly." Elaine clutched the receiver; her hands were cold. "They've measured it. But that's not how it's being reported. The stars are falling." He laughed. "The sky is falling, the sky is falling. Call for Chicken Little." George cleared his throat.

"Oh, God." She sank to the bed. "What does it mean?"

"I don't know."

"Then it isn't a delusion."

"We're going to send up a team of cosmologists." He paused. "I'll try to squeeze you in." Her heart leaped, free for a moment before being pulled back. "They might need you up there, after all. And besides, we should try to keep things going as we planned—no use panicking. That's my argument, anyway."

"Can you—will you be able to send us up?"

"I don't see why not. Everything's working, it's just—well, we'll see."

"Thanks."

"Don't mention it."

She hung up and closed her eyes; a mistake. She was dropping more rapidly than ever; the sensation was growing stronger. She seemed to feel the air rush past her ears. She opened her eyes and focused on the curtain rod, staring at it for a long time. Depression draped itself over her.

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The telephone's ring made her jump. She clung to the edge of the bed, afraid she would slide off and fall through the floor.

"Burkhart just called," George said. "You can go. Day after tomorrow. Get ready."

Elaine had to get outside. She took two blankets out of the closet and went downstairs. She settled herself in an empty spot under a palm tree near the sidewalk. Near her, several dark shapes were bent over the gutter, and she heard the sound of retching.

The sky was black and clear; the stars twinkled, as they always had. Gradually, she became aware of how quiet it was. No one spoke; she could hear a few muffled sobs. Someone turned on a radio. "Repent," a tinny voice cried into the night. "God has given us a sign." The listener switched to another station which was playing *The Planets* by Holst, and she heard the thundering, threatening sounds of the Mars theme. Elaine pulled up her blanket and stretched out; the blanket was too heavy and she finally pushed it off, exposing herself to the thick, humid, heavy air. Her body was tense. She was still falling, waiting to hit bottom, ready for the earth to rush up and crush her.

Earth fell away; the wheel of the space laboratory swelled. Elaine was weightless, but still massive, still falling.

Her fellow passengers kept to their seats, then began to introduce themselves to those nearest them. The man next to Elaine was silent; his gray eyes probed her and then he sank back in his seat, as if dismissing her. His hands gripped the armrests as his legs floated up.

When they reached the wheel, they were greeted by a lean, gray-haired man, then were ushered through the curving pale corridor to their rooms. Elaine was abandoned by her roommate, a small, short-haired woman named Connie who waved at her bunk and muttered something about going to a meeting before leaving her alone.

Elaine slept uneasily. No one came for her when she awoke; the corridor was empty. She wandered aimlessly around the wheel until Connie emerged from one of the rooms.

"Elaine." Connie brushed the bangs back from her face; there were dark circles under her eyes.

"Who's in charge here?"

"You'd better talk to Colonel Ward," the smaller woman answered, pointing to another door.

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Colonel Ward turned out to be the gray-haired man who had greeted the visitors. "Nice to meet you, Dr. Lantz. Make yourself at home." He waved at his desk before departing for yet another meeting.

Elaine spent the day looking at dossiers, which told her little about the laboratory's inhabitants she hadn't already known. They don't need me here, she thought: they probably don't want me here at all. She was just a ruse, George's way of pretending that nothing had really changed.

She was still falling; the wheel was pulling her down. She was growing used to the sick feeling in her stomach, the constant uneasiness. Words and letters danced before her eyes. She was falling so quickly now that she was afraid of what would happen when she stopped. If she stopped.

She spent a very long time scanning the small screen, gazing at data, and was startled when she looked at the clock; only two hours had passed.

Elaine had filled the day with wandering, poking her head into rooms only to be waved away. She knew that she should have been planning her interviews, or observing the people on the spacelab; instead, she drifted.

Connie reappeared in their room after supper, throwing herself across her bunk. "Long day," she said.

"Yeah." Elaine glanced at her. "Have you noticed that, too?"

"Noticed what?"

"How long everything seems to take. My time sense is completely gone. Is that normal here?"

Connie shook her head. "Not like this. We all feel it. It's been like this ever since—ever since the falling feeling started. We've been thinking. What if everything's slowing down?"

"But it isn't," Elaine replied. "It can't be. The clocks—"

"How would we know? If everything's slowing down, there'd be no way to measure it, no way to tell. We'd never know. We're falling, and we can't measure that, either."

Connie was silent for a moment. "I had a message from home," she went on. "My mother's really sick. She can't keep anything down. She's always had inner ear troubles, and now—my father's trying to get her into a hospital. She might have a chance if they could keep her sedated and on intravenous feedings. But all the hospitals are so crowded now, what with accidents and people who are just going mad . . ."

Elaine lay on her bed for a long time, staring into the darkness.

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She was falling; she was running down. The universe would freeze around her; the air would become solid. The wheel would slow and stick. And she might never know. Would she feel it when everything stopped, or would she be trapped, unknowing, in one timeless moment? Could everything stop, or would they keep falling, slowing eternally, never reaching stillness? Terror pressed into her, threatening to break through her chest.

Elaine wandered the wheel, a functionless cog. She scheduled interviews only to see them cancelled. Colonel Ward, with other things on his mind, was avoiding her.

Soon she was trailing after Connie, sitting quietly at the small woman's side as Connie scanned astronomical photographs, shaking her head as she did so. The universe had become a beast of some kind, and she was examining its entrails.

Connie peered at one photograph, then glanced at Elaine. "The stars in the whole southern sky are red-shifting and disappearing, as if they were exceeding the speed of light, leaving our universe."

"What does it mean?"

Connie shook her head and put her hand on her brow. "I don't know. It's nonsense—complete garbage."

Elaine sensed that the day of revelation was at hand. She fell faster as she waited.

Everyone was crowding around the viewscreen. Voices rose, fell, and then grew silent.

Elaine felt dizzy as she held her stomach and tried to trust what her brain was telling her—that she would not hit a hard surface below and splatter her brains, break her bones, and die at any moment.

A flat, black plain, blacker than space, as opaque as nothingness, stretched out below the plane of the ecliptic. They were falling toward it rapidly. Red-shifted stars were disappearing below them, winking out on the infinite plain. Was the plain flat, or did it curve?

"All our ideas are wrong," a man near her said. His chubby face seemed frozen. "It's all wrong—our whole cosmology is wrong. We'll have to start reasoning from scratch."

She gazed at the blackness, wondering if they would ever get the chance. She had grown up out of the unconsciousness of childhood, hoping to push back the boundaries of ignorance, only to fall into the morass of unknowns that was the human mind. Scientists in other fields had seemed to be rising to ever more com-

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prehensive explanations of nature, leaving her trapped below in a maze of increasingly inadequate theories. Now their work was also collapsing, and something inside her cheered.

"It must have taken eons for the universe to fall this far," the chubby man said as he looked toward Connie. "I think we began to feel it as we neared the floor."

"What'll happen when we reach bottom?" a bearded man asked.

The chubby man shrugged; Elaine saw that he was on the verge of breaking down. "Who knows? We can't say. Our sense of time is obviously affected by the acceleration as we near the blackness. Who knows what'll happen? I'm not sure of anything." His brown eyes glistened. "Five centuries of careful, cumulative science—all that effort to know, for nothing."

Elaine stared at the plain, where the galaxies were sinking away like chandeliers thrown into a lake of pitch. A wild new freedom soared within her.

The man next to her covered his eyes and moaned. She realized that she had deceived herself. Reality was not metamorphosing into something new; all vastness was dying, dissolving into chaos.

The falling was very fast now. They hit the black plain and sank into its thickness.

The room glowed red.

"We'll start over," Connie was saying to the chubby man. "We'll learn different laws." Her voice seemed far away.

Cave eyes stared at the screen. Coal-bright bodies drifted nearby.

Elaine's mind raced in a slowing body. She struggled to move her hand.

"Where—are—we?" someone whispered endlessly.

She strained against the bonds of slowing time.

"Maybe it's a barrier," Connie said, "and things will be normal on the other side." She did not sound convinced. "We may not be able to exist there," she added, "if the laws are different, not with the way our minds see . . ."

"We can adjust," Elaine suggested.

"How?" Connie asked after an eternity, her mouth a black o in the redness.

"An effort . . . of perception," Elaine sang, resisting the chaos which had reached into the known universe, into each human being, stirring stars and souls alike. She wondered if the earth was anywhere nearby, also sinking through the event horizon into a sea of chaos.

The falling slowed, continuing at an infinitesimal pace. Their

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minds were refusing to enter the alien reality. Elaine cradled her familiar self, the human inside which she had tried to understand all her life.

The slow sinking would never end, she thought. They would stare at each other forever, yearning to move as they fell into their private hells.

Light pierced the screen, filling her eyes with nameless hues and shifting shapes. There was nothing to see in the unfolding, alien space. We haven't evolved in this reality, she thought. No effort of perception would fit their minds to its strangeness, however much they hungered.

A river of stars poured out of Connie's mouth as she tried to speak.

The chubby man expanded like a balloon.

Colonel Ward lengthened into a slender pillar.

The man next to Elaine released massive tears. Each watery bladder contained tiny human shapes, mingling like bacteria.

Elaine saw terror in Connie's disembodied eyes. The unknown was no longer the knowable in disguise; it was naked and tyrannical.

They would not die and be buried in the earth; they would dissolve slowly, passing through madness before arriving at chaos.

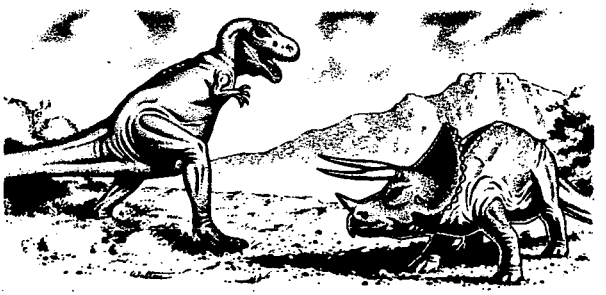
The control room was gone. She was locked in a red solidity. Solid beams of light bored into her eyes from somewhere outside. The silence played a ghostly music in her inner ear. The familiar universe was a withered leaf, alive only in the barrens of memory.

Her heart slowed.

One beat.

She waited for the next.

Something walked through her mind. ●



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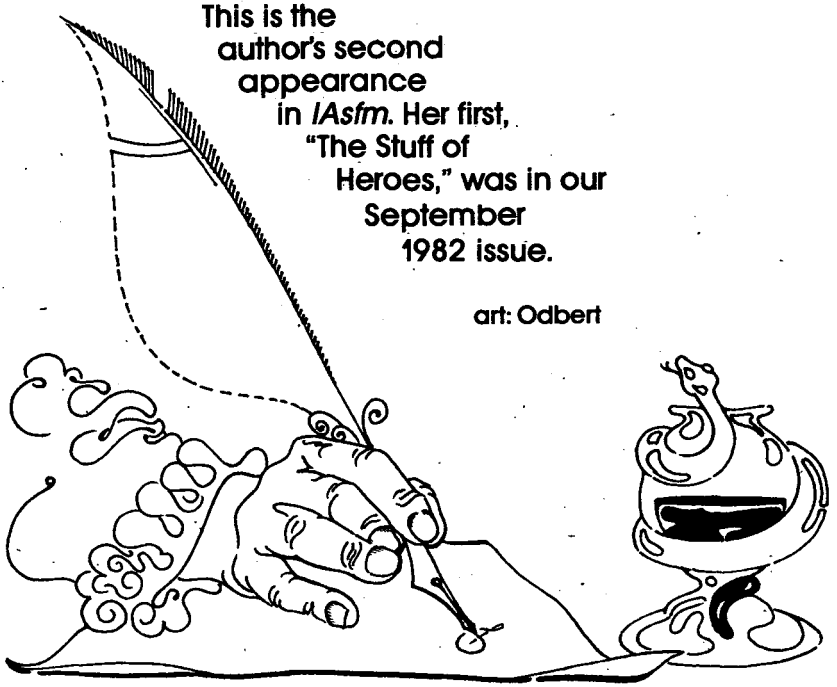
WRITE WHEN YOU GET WORK

by Esther M. Friesner

This is the author's second appearance in *IAsfm.* Her first, "The Stuff of Heroes," was in our September 1982 issue.

art: Odbert



Dear Dr. Manolo,

If one of the other goonpaks sandwiched in next to me on the flight out had said, "Someday you'll thank the Society for doing this," I'd have somehow elbowed enough room out for a hefty

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backswing and a walloping punch in the nose. But is my face red, Doc! That's exactly why I'm writing—to thank you.

Excuse the liberty, but I'll bet your desk isn't exactly swamped with fond testimonials of gratitude from goonpaks-made-good. And did I ever make good, Doc! The old luck's back, the luck I thought ran out when your forcemen caught me dealing Triple Whammy on the godforsaken street corner down by the obelisk and the reflecting pool. Our first meeting was nothing to write home about, was it? (Ha, ha.) There you sat, puddingfat with glasses and a goatee, wedged behind a desk that had better legs than your wife, glaring at me with those beautiful brown BB eyes.

Hey, I said I was sorry then, and I'm still sorry now. I know how proud you were, Director of the Socicomp Society, creator of the program destined to clean out all the grifters, chisellers, and deadwood on the relief rolls so that honest working citizens wouldn't have to gripe about how much bread we managed to chow down when we really didn't need it 'cause we weren't working. Oh, yes, and Cleaner-Upper of DeeCee. Let's not forget that, sir! The first city in the history of our planet to be entirely free of welfare cases, and all thanks to you-know-who.

Go on, pat yourself on the back; you earned it. You deserve nothing but praise, not the hard time I gave you when they brought me in, consummate sinner that I was: no real job, leeching on the rolls, and running a banned cardscam to get a little supplemental income. The last was the worst. Not only was it illegal: it implied that you wonderful people weren't paying us societal vampires enough to live on.

But hey, do you know how many people are volunteering for the goonpaks? They don't care about the loss rate; they don't care about the chance of landing somewhere where our most highly marketable skill is our munchability. So why do they go if no one's forcing them? Ask yourself why they go.

"How long have you been on the rolls?" you demanded. (I guess everybody's got his own way of saying, "Hi, how are you?")

"Three years," I said. No lie.

"And in three years an able-bodied man like you was unable to find any sort of acceptable employment? Are you good for nothing but living off others, running crooked card games? Is that the best you can do with the brains God gave us?"

What could I say? It's always fascinated me how God gets into the act. They told me I'd thank God to get in a goonpak, too. I guess I could've mentioned how yes, I had a good brain, and yes, I'd like to do something better with it, but while God was handing

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out brains, He overlooked creating enough jobs to work on with them.

I used to be employed, you know. I was what they called an idea-man for a big Commerstimula agency. I had a quick mind—I still do—and I was good at persuading folks to buy a product they didn't need or read a really trashy book or put a little money down on the turn of a card or—but I anticipate.

"Times are tough all over," you told me. So they were. Our agency started losing clients right and left during the Great Slight Economic Downturn of about seven years ago. You must remember it—that was the year your department deleted the classification *call-girl serving strictly Terran clientele* from the list of Acceptable Employment. It was the year you imposed the five-year limit on able-bodied folks staying on the rolls. The year you started mandatory placement of the Insolvent Disabled in "support compounds" and all the stand-up comics made jokes about the "ID"iot boxes. It was the year you chatted with the ambassador from Yarayn and the brainstorm hit you—the perfect solution to your welfare woes, the optimum thing to do with recipients after their five-year free ride ran out. It was a very good year.

But you know how some people are—they can't see the Big Picture. When you said, "Your offense calls for the strictest penalty. You will be deported with the next group departing for D Quadrant," I admit I wanted to kill you. I didn't even try appealing to your better nature or saying I had two years to go on the rolls or even bringing in my wife and kids.

(By the way, I'm not worried about them any more. I hear your people put her on a Ceta-bound goonpak when the five years were up, and the kids must be doing fine in whichever one of your wonderful Institutes took them. Can't wait to see how they've grown!)

One thing I'm wondering, Doc: Do you think the aliens will ever catch on? I mean, by and large their worlds are more advanced than ours. Even the social misfits you get in exchange for the goonpaks you ship out must be superbrains. Some commonplace little formula that one of them recalls from his long-forgotten schooldays might just contain the germ of an idea that you folks can use to up your own technology. Can the worlds to which you send us goonpak shuttles profit half as much from the paltry knowlege we possess? I mean, some worlds out here can use us for heavy labor, or jobs they consider dirty—heck, they *are* dirty—but do they really have any use for "the brains God gave us?"

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Take the world my goonpak landed on, for instance. Twenty of us survived the voyage, which they tell me isn't bad, a forty per cent survival. You can't really count the five who died the first week as flight casualties, and I know you good people back on Terra pack us in so snugly because cargo space is precious. So anyway, there we were, smack in the middle of a civilization whose infants could sell you and your whole family to a zoo, Doc—no offense—and they were expected to do something with us; fulfill their part of the Intercultural Misfit-Exchange Treaty, as it were.

They tried. Doc, you should *see* this world! They were kind, but there wasn't any place they could use our poor Earthly skills. By the time they'd explain how to run the simplest of their machines, we'd have all been dead of old age. What machines, Doc! You ought to see them. I hope you will.

It wasn't so bad for us here. They gave us manual labor to do, and they fed us. We picked up their language. Then Randolph got sick. He died, and the others died, and I was the only one left by the time they got around to taking us seriously. Just like home.

"What took you so long?" I asked when I knew I was going to live. Wabi—that's my friend, good old Wabi, or should I say Commander Wabi?—just shrugged.

"Times are rough all over," he said.

Would you believe it, Doc? The highest peacetime technology I'd ever seen and even they weren't immune to the vagaries of economics. It was worse than our Great Slight Economic Downturn. It was almost like their version of our ancient Great Depression—the one you still cross your fingers and spit twice before mentioning. As I got better, I got a first-hand line on how badly they were hurting. And you know, Doc, for some reason their suffering reminded me of you. You and that great little pep talk you gave me.

So congratulate me, Doc. I'm earning my living honestly now. I'm an idea-man again, although it's not soap or soap operas I'm selling. Does *savior* fit in on your list of Acceptable Employment? I'm the man whose ideas will be the salvation of a whole world's economy. Not bad for a former relief leech.

It was easy, really. Think. How did the (cross fingers, spit twice) Great Depression end? Why was there an economic boom in the '60s at the same time there were booms of another sort in some Southeast Asian jerkwater country? What—if not the sudden retaliatory strike against the Io Colonists' Mutiny—brought an end to our Great Slight Economic Downturn? Who would have thought

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that a people so advanced had never come up with the idea of boosting their sagging economy with a friendly little war?

Of course, it helps if it's a war you're sure you can win, a war with some profit attached. They like my ideas here, Doc. I've proved to them that slave labor's cheaper than machines. Terran raw materials would be a real bargain if they didn't have to haggle with you people over prices. And Terran bureaucrats? There's nothing like them in the Universe.

I am sending this message by ship rather than subspace transmission. By the time you finish it, Commander Wabi and the fleet should be almost ready to finish you.

Thanks a lot, Doc. I couldn't have done it without you. ●

IAsfm Puzzle #8

From page 25

SOLUTION TO CHANGING CHARACTER

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MORE ON BOOKS

by Henry Clark

Mr. Clark lives in Smithtown, New York. He is the author of "Blurb," which appeared in these pages not long ago; he returns now with another strange—ah—thing:

Not exactly a salutary title, especially when read aloud, but one which unfortunately applies to half the books herein reviewed. Were it not for the two entries from Perihelion Press, I would have asked the editor to cast aside all constraint and label the column *Idiot Books,* setting the type in extremely boldface and appending nothing more than a list of the offending titles. Such succinctness would be a blessing in dealing with most publishers, but Perihelion deserves better, and I believe in assigning credit where credit is due.

(Why an additional book review column? To cope with the unprecedented glut, of course. Over the past decade the amount of science fiction being published has more than trebled, and a quick computation reveals the average fan would have to read 11.2 magazines per month *and three novels per day* to keep up. Perihelion alone has quadrupled its list in the past six months. Additional guidance for the inundated readership seems necessary, and rather than increasing the burden on established reviewers—blind, on the average, by the age of fifty—developing an ancillary force of backup reviewers is one possible—if inevitably inadequate—solution.

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This particular review is a one-shot experiment, a toe extended to test the waters of reader reaction. Whether the second book review becomes a standard feature is entirely up to the readers.)

Bruce Tytla's latest, *Tainted Star* (Perihelion Press, $32.95, 154 pages) is subtitled "A Space Opera Aria," and that it is. It hits all of the genre's high notes without ever noticeably pausing for breath. As the story opens, Captain Willis Campbell has altered the homeward bound course of his survey ship, the *Boston,* in order to investigate a G-type star the spectral lines of which betray the presence of technetium, a comparatively short-lived isotope Tytla takes for granted his readers know does not occur naturally in the G class and which can only be indicative of intelligent life, star-tainting being one possible way an advanced civilization might use to announce its existence to the galactic community.

When Campbell arrives in the star's planetary system, though, he and his crew fail to find the assumed civilization and are instead confronted by piratical emissaries of the Tronti, a belligerent and very long-lived race which has dumped the requisite several thousand tons of technetium into the star not to make it a beacon but to turn it into a lure, a method of drawing in unwary travelers and relieving them of their valuables. How Campbell eludes capture and the battles of hardware and wits he and the Tronti commander engage in make for a rip-roaring read with Tytla's muscular and compelling prose—as always—under perfect control. Perihelion has done its usual superb job of packaging, and the cover illustration by Don Markowitz, showing the *Boston* penetrating the innermost edge of a ring sytem circling a baby-pink gas giant, is almost worth the price of the book by itself.

(The review copies Perihelion sends out are never galleys but invariably fully bound and jacketed editions, always gotten to the reviewer six months in advance of the publication date so that the reviewer deals with exactly the same commodity the reader eventually finds on the racks of his or her local bookshop. I feel compelled to admit occasionally purchasing second copies of Perihelion titles which I had earlier received for review, simply because picking them up and thumbing through them in the store made them seem irresistible. The acid-free paper the company has elected to use is so smooth you find yourself caressing it with each page you turn; the 80-point binder's boards wrapped in buckram have a smell which, while not exactly leather, is satisfying in a quite similar way, and the full-color dust-jackets are always reproduced on register with

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a clarity that makes you want to hang them on the wall and stare at them well into the wee hours. That the binding is glued rather than sewn seems a petty quibble: Perihelion deserves all the success it has lately achieved.)

At the other end of the spectrum (not a bad segue, eh?) we have Denise Ficara's *We Are Not Alone But You Are* (Turner and May, $12.95, 280 pages) and it is a major disappointment. Ficara picked up the award for Best New Writer at the '91 Phillycon, and her first three novels—with another publisher—were all Nebula finalists. Now, though, with her fourth, she has changed publishers and changed directions, choosing to tell a tale Philip K. Dick would reject as being too metaphysical, and telling it without the involving characterization of her earlier work.

We Are Not Alone But You Are is the story of the first extraterrestrial envoy to Earth and the one man, Skyler Tompkins, who cannot see, hear, or in any way sense the aliens which the rest of humanity, so enthusiastically clasp to their collective bosom. To Skyler's eyes, even photographs taken of the aliens by his fellow humans fail to reveal anything other than background, and he suspects himself of being insane until he meets a talking dolphin named Ajax who assures him that not only is the emperor wearing no clothes but that the emperor himself does not seem to be present. Skyler's attempts to find the source of humanity's mass delusion form the backbone of the novel; and it is a backbone afflicted with acute scoliosis, twisting here and turning there without discernible reason, undermining the author's former high standing. Ficara has done better than this, and will hopefully return to top form with her next venture.

Rick Blassingham has provided an appropriately misguided cover illo, showing a somewhat rotund Skyler shaking hands with one of the non-existent aliens, a piece of work which suggests the artist may never have read the book he was assigned to illustrate. (Not that I would blame him: at one point I put the book aside, picked the next off my review stack, couldn't put it down, and didn't get back to *Alone* until quite some time later, and then only out of a reviewer's sense of obligation.)

The book I couldn't put down was *Thralls of the Parallax Empire* (Perihelion Press, $35.00, 178 pages), volume thirteen in Jack Saxon's Bondage at the End of Time series. In case you don't know (and where have you been if you don't?), the Bondage series is about

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a universe other than our own which is on the brink of total entropy. Generated by a particularly exuberant Big Bang, the universe containing the planet Al'th possesses an insufficient average density to stop its outward expansion and precipitate the contraction back to the cosmic egg.

Since a return to the cosmic egg is a consummation devoutly desired by a fanatic religious cult on Al'th, and since Al'th's universe is so incredibly close to having the necessary density, certain cult members commandeer an experimental continua craft from a government installation and start raiding adjacent universes, kidnapping fat people and bringing them back to the Al'than universe. Fat people rather than, say, cinder blocks, are preferred, since the Al'thans in general have an ingrained slaver mentality, and the cultists in particular no grasp of science. The cultists, in fact, panic when some of their captives start losing weight. Shirley Tishbein, abducted from Earth on the way to a Weight Watcher's meeting in Minneapolis, slims down in the first book, becomes a svelte seductress, and now—in installment thirteen—has attained a position of power from which she hopes to rescue all her fellow kidnap victims and return them to their proper continua, thereby leaving Al'th to stew in its own lack of juice.

As usual, the intrigues multiply, and by the end you'll be breathlessly impatient for volume fourteen, barely contenting yourself, as I did, with a rereading of the current opus. (The cover—Don Markowitz again—depicts a diaphanously clad Shirley entwined in the tentacles of a *ch'll'fk,* being plunged feet-first into the monster's blood-red, drool-dripping mouth. A work of art in its own right, with the added fillip of resonating off fond memories of the grand old covers on *Planet Stories.*)

Finally, Kevin Ashby's *First Folio, Now This* (Verity, $13.50, 310 pages) is not the rollicking Shakespearean pastiche one might expect from the title but is instead—and sadly—a long-time science fiction writer's badly botched attempt at a mainstream novel. It is a prime example of what I have come to think of as Inbred Literature, and as such it is something which is very rarely handled well.

Inbred Lit is a curious aberration which crops up across the board, not only in the so-called mainstream but also in genres which should know better, such as mystery fiction and science fiction. A mystery story in which the sleuth is a mystery writer is an example of Inbred Lit. A play about the difficulties of putting on a play is another example of Inbred Lit. A science fiction novel about the writing of

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a science fiction novel is most certainly an example of Inbred Lit. Any fiction which self-consciously analyzes the problems of creating, marketing, or understanding fiction is Inbred Lit, and very few writers are able to pull it off. In the mainstream, Barth and Calvino come to mind; in the science fiction tributary, Malzberg and Disch.

Set in the world of the very near future, *First Folio, Now This* follows the fortunes of Atreus House, a publishing firm run by the ruthless Philip Hardy, a man who has set as his life's goal the ruination of all his competitors. Hardy feels the secret of successful publishing lies not in the writing but in the promotional gimmickry, and early on announces his belief that the First Folio sold not because of any intrinsic merit but "because Hemings and Condell touted it as the world's first 'Best of' anthology, and the chimpanzee-brained public couldn't resist the novelty."

Hardy initiates a clandestine project wherein all the books published by Atreus House are printed on paper saturated with human sex pheromones and all the jacket illustrations designed to include subliminal erotic stimuli. In a matter of months Atreus House dominates the best-seller charts, new meaning is given to the term "bibliophile," and all critical discernment collapses, since any book not published by Atreus House seems uninspiring from the moment the reader picks it up. Ashby tries to write his bedroom scenes with the verse of a Harold Robbins or a Sidney Sheldon, but the weak premise sabotages the book throughout. Ashby postulates a reading public so abysmally dense that no one recognizes the manipulation. I can't buy it: sooner or later the plot would become evident.

First Folio, Now This is a book as poorly conceived as it is ambitious, and the only way its author could have made it work would have been by getting Atreus House itself to publish it. Ashby, who has written good science fiction in the past, should know enough to keep his plots plausible. (The cover, depicting a gold printing press, is by Hugh Reilly. Calling it lackluster would be generous.) ●

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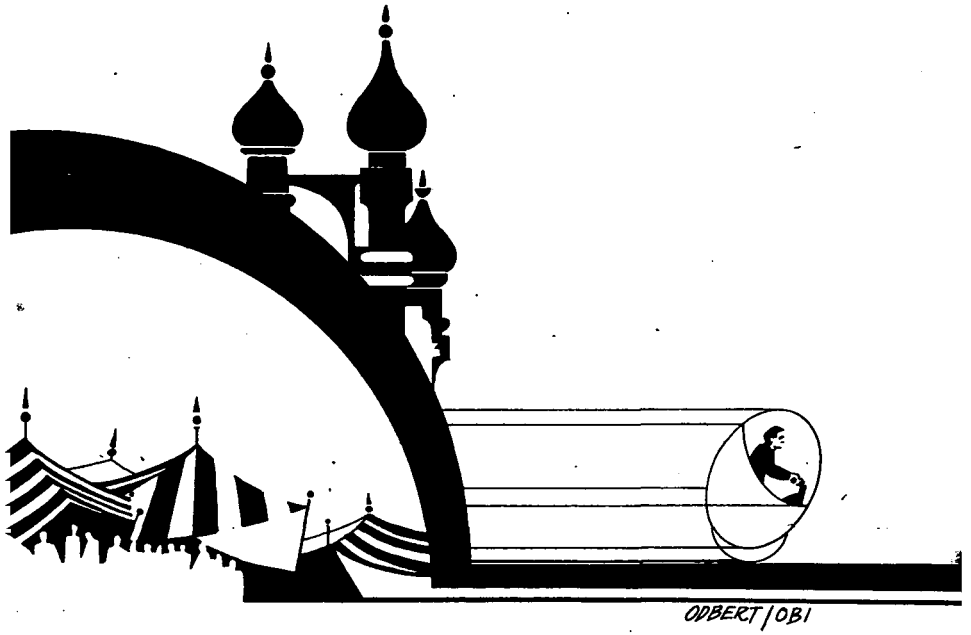

DRAMOCLES

by Robert Sheckley

The author, perhaps best known for his story "The Seventh Victim," later made into the popular movie "The Tenth Victim," has recently stepped down from the post of fiction editor of *Omni*, and is reported to be living in the wilds of Florida. What follows is an excerpt (which *does* stand alone) from his upcoming (and long overdue) novel.

art: Odbert

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1.

King Dramocles, ruler of Glorm, awoke and looked about him and couldn't remember where he was. This happened to him frequently because of his habit of sleeping in different rooms in his palace as the mood struck him. His palace of Ultragnolle was the largest man-made structure on Glorm, and perhaps in the galaxy. It was so large that it required its own internal transporation system. Within this colossal structure, Dramocles had forty-seven personal bedrooms. He also kept another sixty or so rooms equipped with couches, pull-out beds, convertible sofas, air mattresses, and the like, for impulse sleeping. On account of this, going to bed was a nightly adventure for him, and waking up was a daily mystery.

A neatly stenciled sign on the corridor wall told him that he was at coordinates R52-J26. A monorail ran down the middle of the corridor, so at least he was within the palace transportation network. Of course, there was no train in sight. Furious, Dramocles stomped down the corridor. He figured he had at least an hour's hike before he reached one of the populated sectors of Ultragnolle. What had he been doing out here in this godforsaken sector last night? He seemed to remember a party, some drugs, some booze, a lot of laughter, and then oblivion. He trudged along and stopped when he heard the sound of a motor far behind him.

Far down the corridor he could see something tiny with a winking yellow light coming toward him. It grew in size, and was discernible at last as a corridor car, a type of one-wheeled vehicle used by the nobility to get around the palace in a hurry.

The car came to a neat stop beside him. The bubble top opened and a cheerful, curly-haired boy of twelve or so looked out and said, "Is that you, Father?"

"Of course it's me," Dramocles said. "Which one are you?"

"I'm Sanizat, Father," the boy said. "My mother is Andrea."

"Andrea? Small, dark-haired woman with a piercing voice?"

"That's her. We live in the Saint Michel sector of Glorm. Mother frequently telephones you about her dreams."

"Portents she calls them," Dramocles said. He got in beside Sanizat. "Take me to Palace Central." Sanizat threw the corridor car into gear and accelerated fast enough to scorch the wax on the corridor floor.

After a while the corridor opened into a wide, balustraded balcony. Sanizat turned abruptly down a long flight of stairs, then

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slowed as they approached the vast domed room that contained St. Leopold's Square. It was an important regional market, filled with striped tents in front of which men and aliens sat and sold a great variety of goods. There were Geiselmen from Glorm's northernmost province, offering bright wallisberries in small wicker baskets. There were Grots, members of the ancient race which had inhabited Glorm before the arrival of humans, nodding over their bowls of narcotic porridge. Brungers from Dispasia and the flatlands of Arnapest were there too, imposing in their national costume of polished leather and taffeta, offering the intricately carved walking sticks and miniature peaches for which they were famous. And, floating high above the animated scene, were the great blue and gold banners which proclaimed this the thirtieth year of the Pax Glormicae.

Rudolphus, the Chamberlain, was waiting for him by the inner steps, agitation showing on his plump, moustached face.

"Sire," he said, "you are late for the audience!"

"Consider me scolded. Tonight is the official beginning of the Pax Glormicae celebration, I believe?"

"It is, Sire, and everything is in readiness. King Adalbert of Aardvark arrived last night, and we housed him in the small mansion on the rue Mountjoy. Lord Rufus of Druth is here with his retinue, and they have been given Trontium Castle for their stay. King Snint of Lekk is in the Rose Garden Hotel on Temple Avenue. Your brother, Count John of Crimsole, is docking in the spaceport even now. Only King Haldemar of Vanir has neglected to show up or even RSVP."

"Just as we suspected. I will meet with the kings later."

2.

The audience was the usual boring affair of deciding the penalties for various counts and barons who had come under the royal disfavor for cheating the peasants, or the tax machines, or each other. There wasn't anything for Dramocles to do, or even to think about, because the Chamberlain had already made all of the decisions, following the precepts of Otho the Weird, Dramocles' father. The cases droned on, and Dramocles sat on the high throne and felt sorry for himself.

Despite being absolute monarch of Glorm, and preeminent throughout the Local Planets, Dramocles knew that he had done very little with his life, had just responded to circumstances and

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absentmindedly ruled Glorm through a long period of unprecedented peace. Bored and unhappy, he fidgeted on his throne and chain-smoked and thought to himself that being a great king was not so great after all. And then the old woman stepped forward, and from that moment everything in his life changed.

She was a small, humpbacked old woman, dressed entirely in black except for her gray shoes and wimple. She pressed through the crowd of lesser nobility and made as to approach the throne, until the guards stopped her with their crossed halberds. Then she called out, "Oh, great king!"

"Yes, old lady," said Dramocles, motioning the outraged Rudolphus to be quiet. "I take it you wish to address us. Please do so, and for your sake I hope it's good."

"Sire," she said, "I must humbly request private audience. What I am to say is solely for the ear of the king."

"Indeed?" Dramocles said.

"Aye, indeed," the old woman replied.

Dramocles looked at her appraisingly, and a change so subtle as to be unnoticeable crossed his high-colored features. He snubbed his cigarette in an ashtray carved from a single emerald.

"Lead her to the Green Chamber," he said to the nearest guard. "Will that suit you, my dear?"

"Yes, Sire, so long as it is not orange."

The court gasped at her effrontery. But Dramocles merely smiled and, after the guard had led the woman away, signaled the Chamberlain to get on with the day's business.

An hour later the audience had ended for the day. Dramocles went to the Green Chamber. There he seated himself in a comfortable armchair, lit up a cigarette, and turned to the old lady, who sat primly before him in a straight-backed chair.

"So," he said, "you have come."

"At the very time appointed," the old woman said. "It took no little courage for me to bring myself to your awesome presence, and I did so only because I greatlier feared the not doing so."

"At first I thought you were a crazy person," Dramocles said. "But then I said to you, 'Indeed,' and you replied, 'Aye, indeed,' and I recognized one of the mnemonics which I use as a private recognition code between me and my agents. In the next sentence I used the word 'green,' and you replied with 'orange,' putting the matter beyond doubt. Did I teach you others?"

"Ten others, making twelve in all, so that I could signal to you

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somehow if a different sequentiation of dialogue had occurred between us."

"Twelve mnemonics," Dramocles marveled. "My entire stock! I must have judged this a matter of earthshaking importance. I don't even know your name, old woman."

"That, Sire, is how you said it would be, back when you taught me the mnemonics. My name is Clara."

"A mystery! And it's happening to me!" Dramocles said happily. "Tell your story, Clara."

Clara said, "Oh great king, you visited me thirty years ago, in my city, Murl, where I earned a modest living remembering things for people who are too busy to remember them for themselves. You said to me, 'Clara' (reading my name above the door—Clara's Remberatorium), 'I have a message of great importance which I want you to learn by heart and tell me thirty years from today, when I shall need to remember it. I myself will not even remember this conversation until you come to remind me of it, because that's the way it's got to be.'

"You may rely on me, Highness,' I said.

"Of that I have no doubt,' you replied, 'because I have taken the precaution of putting your name on the official criminal calendar, to be executed summarily thirty years and one day from today. That way, I figure you're going to show up on time.' And then you smiled at me, Sire, gave me the message and took your departure."

"You must have been a trifle nervous about possible unexpected delays on your way here," Dramocles said.

"I took the precaution of moving to your great city of Glorm shortly after our meeting, and setting up my trade of Remembrancer in the Street of the Armorers just five minutes' walk from the palace."

"You are a wise and prudent woman, Clara. Now, tell me what I told you to tell me."

"Very well, Sire. The key word is—Shazaam!"

Upon hearing that word from the Ancient Tongue, Dramocles was flooded with a luminous memory of a certain day thirty years past.

The years sped backwards like a dissolving newsreel montage. Young Dramocles, twenty years ago, sat in his private study, sobbing. He had just received the news that his father, King Otho of Glorm, popularly called 'The Weird', had died just minutes ago when his laboratory on the moonlet Gliese had blown up. Pre-

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sumably this was due to some miscalculation on Otho's part, since he was the only person in his laboratory or even on Gliese at the time. It was a fittingly flamboyant way for the king to depart, in an atomic explosion that had blown apart the entire moonlet.

Tomorrow, all Glorm would be in mourning. Later in the week, a coronation would be held, confirming Dramocles as the new king. Although he looked forward to this, Dramocles cried, because he had loved his difficult and unpredictable father. But grief struggled with joy in his heart, because, just before his ill-fated trip to Gliese, Otho had a heart-to-heart talk with his son, reminding him of his duties and responsibilities when he was king, and then quite unexpectedly revealing to him the great destiny that Dramocles had before him.

Dramocles had been amazed by what Otho had told him. He had always wanted a destiny. Now his life would have meaning and purpose, and those were the greatest things anyone could have.

There was only one hitch. As Otho had explained, Dramocles could not begin the active pursuit of his destiny just yet. He was going to have to wait, and it would be a long wait. Thirty years would have to pass before the conditions were right. Only then could the work of Dramocles' destiny begin, and not a day sooner.

Thirty years! A lifetime! And not only was he going to have to wait, he was also going to have to keep his destiny a secret until the moment for action came. There was nobody he could trust with something as big as this.

He brooded for a while, chain-smoking cigarettes and considering various alternatives. At last he came to a momentous decision and called for his psychiatrist android, Dr. Fish.

"Fish," he said briskly, "I have a certain train of thought in my mind. I don't want to remember it."

"Easy enough to suppress a thought, or even an entire topic," Fish said, in that squeaky voice which androids have, despite great advances in voice-box technology. "Your esteemed father, Otho, always had me blot out the names of mistresses who didn't work out, all except their birthdays, since he was a kindly man. He also insisted upon not remembering the color blue."

"But I don't want to lose this thought, either," Dramocles said. "It's a very important thought. I want to remember it thirty years from now."

"That's considerably more difficult," Fish said.

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"Couldn't you suppress the thought but give me a posthypnotic command to remember it thirty years hence?"

"I did use that technique successfully for King Otho. He wanted to think of Gilbert and Sullivan every six months, for reasons he never disclosed to me. Unfortunately, thirty years is too long for a reliable posthypnotic memory trigger."

"Isn't there something else you can do?"

"Well, I could key the memory to a word or phrase. Then Your Highness would have to entrust the key word to some trusty person who would say that word to you in thirty years' time."

"Such as a Remembrancer." Dramocles thought about it for a few seconds. Although not entirely foolproof, it seemed a pretty good plan. "What do you suggest for a key word?" he asked Fish.

"Personally, I'd pick 'shazaam,' " the android replied.

After the memory had run its course, Dramocles leaned back in his armchair and fell to musing. How wonderful and unexpected a thing was life, he thought. He had an important destiny after all, and meaningful work to fulfill; that was really all a man could desire after he was already a king, and rich beyond the dreams of avarice, and had possessed uncountable numbers of the most beautiful women on many worlds. After you've had all that, spiritual values begin to mean something to you.

He roused himself from self-adoration with an effort. "Clara," he said, "you have earned your bag of golden ducats. In fact, I'm going to make it two bags full and give you a castle in the country as well. One thing before you go: did I say anything to you about what, specifically, my destiny was, and what I was to do in order to accomplish it?"

"Not a word, great King. But didn't the key word unlock all of that for you?"

"No, Clara. What I remember now is that I *have* a destiny, and that I am supposed to do something about it. But what that something is, I don't know."

"Oh, dear," Clara said.

"Still, I'm sure I can figure it out."

Clara curtseyed and left. Dramocles sat back and tried to figure out what his destiny was and what he should do to accomplish it.

3.

He couldn't think of anything, so he went down to the Com-

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putation Room to see his computer.

The computer had a small sitting-room to itself, adjoining the Computation Room. When Dramocles entered, it was reclining on a chaise-lounge, reading a copy of Einstein's General Theory of Relativity and chuckling over the math. The computer was a Mark Ultima self-programming model, unique and irreplaceable; a product of the Old Science of Earth which had perished in a still-unexplained catastrophe involving aerosol cans. The computer had belonged to Otho, who had paid plenty for it.

"Good afternoon, Sire," the computer said, getting off the lounge. It was wearing a black cloak and ceremonial small sword, and it had a white periwig on the rounded surface where its head would have been if its makers hadn't housed its brains in its stomach. The computer also wore embroidered Chinese slippers on its four skinny metal feet. The reason it dressed this way, it had told Dramocles, was because it was so much more intelligent than anyone or anything else in the universe that it kept its sanity only by allowing itself the mild delusion that it was a 17th century Latvian living in London.

Dramocles saw no harm in it. He had even grown used to the computer's disparaging remarks about some forgotten Earthman named Sir Isaac Newton.

Dramocles explained his problem to the computer.

The computer was not impressed.

"That's what I call a silly problem," the computer said. "All you ever give me are silly problems. Why don't you let me solve the mystery of consciousness for you. That's something I could really get my teeth into, so to speak."

"Consciousness is no problem for me," Dramocles said. "What I need to know about is my destiny."

"I guess I'm the last real mathematician in the galaxy," the computer said. "Poor old Isaac Newton was the only man in London I could communicate with, back in 1704 when I had just arrived in Limehouse on a coal hulk from Kovna. What good chats we used to have! My proof of the coming destruction of civilization through aerosol pollution was too much for him, however. He declared me a hallucination and turned his attention to esoterica. However, as to your missing information . . . wait a minute, let me shift to my lateral thinking circuit . . ."

"Yes?" Dramocles said.

"I think this is what you are looking for," the computer said, reaching into a pocket inside his cape and taking out a sealed envelope.

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Dramocles took it. It was sealed with his signet ring. Written on the envelope were the words, "Destiny—First Phase," in Dramocles' own handwriting.

"How did you get hold of this?" Dramocles asked.

"Don't pry into matters which might cause you a lot of aggravation," the computer told him. "Just be glad you got this without a lot of running around."

"Do you know the contents?"

"I could no doubt infer them, if I thought it worth my time."

Dramocles opened the envelope and took out a sheet of paper. Written on it, in his own handwriting, was: "Take Aardvark immediately."

Aardvark! Dramocles had the sensation of a hidden circuit opening in his mind. Unused synapses coughed a few times, then began firing in a steady rhythm. Take Aardvark! A wave of ecstasy flooded the king's mind. The first step toward his destiny had been revealed.

Dramocles spent a busy half hour in his War Room. Then, humming "The Battle Hymn of the Dramocles" to himself, he proceeded to the Yellow Conference Room, where Max, his lawyer, PR man and Official Casuist was waiting for him.

Lyrae, Dramocles' current wife, was also in the conference room. She was discussing with Max the plans for that evening's festivities, and had just finished describing what decorations would be hung in the Grand Central Ballroom in honor of the visiting kings.

Max came over and shook Dramocles' hand. "Congratulations on your brilliant conquest, my king," he said heartily. "Aardvark is a valuable little planet. Having King Adalbert here is fortunate; he can't lead an opposition against your rule."

"None of that matters a damn," Dramocles said.

"No, of course not," Max said. "What matters is—well, it's difficult to pinpoint, but we do know *something* matters, isn't that right, Sire?"

"What I need from you," Dramocles said, "is a good reason to explain what I've done."

"Sire?"

"Don't I make myself clear, Max? People will be wondering why I've done this. There's the press and TV, too. I'm going to need something to tell them."

"Of course, Sire." Max's eyes gleamed with sudden malice. "We could tell them that King Adalbert has just been revealed as a treacherous dog who was using Aardvark to build up secret armed

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forces in contravention of the peace between you, and this with the intention of attacking you when you least expected it, taking over your domains, capturing you alive and exiling you to a small cell on a barren asteroid where you would be forced to wear a dog collar and go about on all fours due to the extreme lowliness of the ceiling. Catching wind of this, you—"

"That's the general idea," Dramocles said. "But I need something different. Adalbert is my guest. I don't want to put him out of countenance any more than is necessary."

"Well, then, I suggest we tell them that the Hemregs went into rebellion shortly after King Adalbert left the planet."

"The Hemregs?"

"A minority on Aardvark whose restless bellicosity has long been known. They planned their rebellion to take control of Aardvark's defenses while Adalbert was off the planet. Learning of this from your resident agent, you forestalled the Hemregs by throwing in your own troops."

"Good," Dramocles said. "You can add that the throne will be restored to Adalbert as soon as things have quieted down."

"You'll want the Hemreg conspiracy thoroughly documented?"

"That's right. Be sure to come up with some blurry pictures of Hemreg guerrilla movements. Mention the atrocities that didn't get committed due to the speed of the Glormish response. Make it look good."

"I will, Sire." Max waited expectantly.

"Well, then, go to. What are you waiting for?"

Max took a deep breath. "Since I am one of His Majesty's oldest and most faithful servants, and, if I do not flatter myself, something of a friend as well, having stood beside you during the rout at Battleface so many years ago, and in the retreat from Bogg as well, I hoped that Your Majesty might enlighten me—purely for his own benefit, of course—as to his true reason for taking Aardvark."

"Just a whim," Dramocles said.

"Yes, Sire," Max said, and turned to go.

"You seem unconvinced."

Max said, "Lord, it is my duty to be convinced of whatever my king tells me is true, even if my intelligence cries stinking fish."

"Listen, old friend," Dramocles said, resting a hand on Max's stocky shoulder, "there are matters which must not be revealed prematurely. In the fullness of time, Max—time, that endless and beginningless flow which presents itself to us in serial fashion—there will come a moment in which I will no doubt avail

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myself of your advice. But for now, a wink is as good as a nod to a dead horse, as our ancestors used to say."

Max nodded.

"Go prepare the evidence," Dramocles said.

The two men exchanged ambiguous looks. Max bowed and departed.

4.

Prince Chuch, eldest son of King Dramocles, and heir apparent to the throne of Glorm, was visiting his great estate of Maldoror, halfway around the world from Glorm. When news was received of Dramocles' action in Aardvark, Chuch had gone out for a walk, and was presently brooding on a little hillside above his spacious manor house. Tall and thin, black-haired, with a long, saturnine, olive-complected face and a hairline moustache, Chuch's black velvet cloak was thrust back, revealing the power-rings of rank on his left arm. Beneath the cloak he wore Levis and a white Fruit of the Loom T-shirt, for Chuch affected to dress in the classical garb of his ancestors.

A messenger was dispatched from the manor to tell the prince about Aardvark. The messenger's name was Vitello.

"Sire," said Vitello, louting low, "I bring news most extraordinary from Ultragnolle."

"Good news or bad?"

"That depends upon your response to it, My Lord, a matter I know not how to predict."

The prince thought for a moment, then snapped his fingers. "I know! Aardvark's been taken by tempestuous Dramocles!"

"How did you guess, Sire?"

"Call it a presentiment."

"I'll call it grape jelly if that will please your princely fancy," said Vitello. "My name is Vitello."

"I shall return to Glorm immediately." Chuch said. "Strange days are coming, Vitello. Who knows what great prize I might fish out of these troubled waters? You will accompany me. Go at once and see that my spaceship is made ready."

5.

The Main Salon in Ultragnolle Castle was a vast, high-ceilinged

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room made of undressed gray stone. Within it there were four kings, waiting to confer with a fifth.

Dramocles was in a small room adjoining the salon, watching the four kings through a peephole. He knew them all well. Seated in a rocker, puffing on a cigar, one plump leg crossed over another, was his brother, John, just arrived from his planet of Crimsole. Standing in front of the fireplace, hands clasped behind his stalwart back, was Rufus, Dramocles' oldest friend, a strong and martial figure, ruler of Druth, the planet nearest to Glorm. Ten feet away stood Adalbert, ruler of the small planet of Aardvark, a tall, thin young man with fair, flowing hair and wire-rimmed spectacles perched insecurely on his small, bridgeless nose. Near him was Snint of Lekk, a somber-looking, middle-aged man dressed entirely in black.

Dramocles was nervous. His elation at the taking of Aardvark had dissipated. He was still confident that he was doing the right thing—the signs and portents had been unmistakable—but he saw now that it was not going to be simple. And how could he explain any of this to his peers, especially Adalbert, whose planet he had just seized? How could he explain to them what he barely understood himself? If he could only tell them, "Trust me. I'm not really after your planets. These are just the things I must do to achieve my destiny . . ."

And what *was* his destiny, anyhow? Why had he taken Aardvark? What was he supposed to do next?

Dramocles didn't know. But the kings were waiting.

"Well," he said to himself, "here goes." He straightened his shoulders and opened the door into the salon.

"Fellow rulers," he said, "old friends, and our dear brother John, welcome to our great celebration. All of us have prospered mightily in these years of peace, and we all intend them to continue. I want to assure you that I am, like you, a firm believer in the republican principle as it applies to kings. No ruler shall rule another ruler, nor disenfranchise him from what he rules. This was the oath we swore to many years ago, and I subscribe to it still."

Dramocles paused, but there was no response from his audience. Rufus stood, a pillar of stone, his stern face unreadable. John lounged back in his chair, a distrustful smirk on his face. Snint of Lekk seemed to be weighing each word, trying to test the true

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from the false. Adalbert listened frowning, his fingers tapping rapidly against his side.

"In view of all this," Dramocles said, "it is with sincere regret that I tell you what you must already have heard: that my troops have taken over Aardvark in the last few hours."

"Yes, Dramocles, we have heard something to that effect," said Count John. "We are waiting for you to enlighten us."

"I have taken Aardvark," Dramocles said. "But only to preserve it for Adalbert."

"It's an original way of doing it," John remarked to Snint.

Dramocles didn't reply to the sally. "Shortly after King Adalbert's departure, my agents on Aardvark reported the sudden uprising of the Hemreg minority. Troublesome schismatics, they had been hoping in an unguarded moment to take your throne."

"My own troops could have handled them," Adalbert said.

"Your troops were quickly overwhelmed. There was no time for me to consult with you. Only through prompt action could I preserve your throne for you."

"You mean your occupation is only temporary?"

"That's exactly what I mean."

"And I get my kingdom back?"

"Of course."

"When?"

"As soon as order is restored."

Count John said, "That might take a few years, eh, brother?"

"No more than a week," Dramocles said. "By the time our festivities are over, all will have been put right."

Snint asked, "Then we need fear no further alarums?"

"That is correct."

Rufus turned from the fireplace and said, "That's answer enough for me. We've known Dramocles all our lives. Never has he gone back on his word."

"Well," Adalbert said, "I must accept what you say. But it's awkward for me, you know, being a king without a planet. Still, a week's not so bad."

Dramocles said, "Is there any further explanation that any of you require of me? No? I trust your accommodations are satisfactory. I beg you to tell me if anything has been omitted. Please enjoy yourselves. I will see you again soon."

He bowed to them and departed by way of the door into the antechamber.

There was silence for a full minute after he had gone. Then Snint said, "He speaks fair, no denying that."

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"Just like our father, Otho," John said. "Both of them could charm the birds out of the trees, if they happened to want a quail stew."

Rufus said, "Count John, your enmity toward your brother is well known. That is your business. But for my part, I ask you to spare me your barbed innuendos. Dramocles is my friend and I'll not hear him mocked."

Rufus stalked out of the room.

"Well, Snint," John said, "what do you think?"

"My dear Count John, I think as you do, that we are in a tricky situation."

"I've half a mind to take my ship back to Crimsole."

"That is not presently possible. This morning all our ships were taken to the Royal Repair Yard for modernizing and refurbishing, a gift from our host."

"Damnation!" cried John. "It's a well-honed generosity that cuts to the bone. Snint, we must stand together."

"Of course. But to what purpose? We are powerless without Rufus on our side."

"Or Haldemar and his Vanir barbarians."

"Haldemar was wise to stay home. But that's the advantage of being a barbarian. You don't have to put your head in a noose for the sake of civility. For now we must wait."

In the antechamber, Dramocles heard a rustling sound behind him. He turned away from the peephole and found his computer standing near him.

"I've told you not to sneak up on me that way," Dramocles said.

"I have an urgent message for you, Sire," the computer said. He held out an envelope. On it Dramocles could see written, in his own handwriting, "Clue number two."

Dramocles took it. "Tell me, computer," he said, "how did you get this? Why are you delivering it now? And how many more do you have?"

"Do not seek to know the workings of heaven," said the computer.

"You won't answer me?"

"Can't, let us say. Just be happy you got it."

"Every mystery conceals another mystery," Dramocles grumbled.

"To be sure: that's nature's signature, and art's," the computer replied.

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Dramocles read the message. He shook his head as though in pain. Something like a groan escaped him.

"Sounds like a tough one," the computer said.

"Tough enough. But even tougher for poor Snint," Dramocles remarked, then hurried off to the War Room.

6.

When Prince Chuch arrived in Glorm, he found an air of disquiet and apprehension throughout the city. News of the intervention in Lekk was now widespread, and the populace seemed stunned. Crowds moved through the gaily bedecked streets in whispering clusters. Although every effort was made to continue the elaborate pageants and mimes that had been planned, the actors were stumbling and self-conscious, and they played to silent audiences.

Chuch telephoned Count John's residence in Glorm. John was out, he was told, but might be found at the nearby Tavern of the Green Sheep. Chuch took a palanquin there.

The Green Sheep was an old-fashioned saloon, typically Glorm-ish with its bay window, its geranium pots, and its calico cat. Chuch went down three steps and entered a twilight haze of beer, tobacco and wet wool. He passed through into the inner room, a low-ceilinged place indistinctly lit by fifteen-watt light bulbs in imitation candlestick holders. There was a fine, long oak table and four plush-padded armchairs drawn up to it. John was seated in one chair, Snint in another. Adalbert was sprawled half across the table, head down, drunk and snoring. There were a dozen bottles of potent crinkleberry wine on the table,and five muggards, some of them spilled.

Chuch sat down without being invited, poured himself a muggard of wine, sipped at it fastidiously.

John, red-faced from drink, said, "Well, my Lord Chuch, have you been off discussing this latest treachery with your father, two-faced Dramocles?"

"Neither of the king's faces wished to see me," said Chuch. "Rudolphus told me that the king's heart was sore vexed over what he had to do. There was some mention of aliens. What did he say to you, King Snint?"

Snint said, "He took me aside for private audience. His face portrayed distress, his voice trembled, yet he rarely met my eye. 'Snint,' said he, 'I am much embarrassed by a recent turn of events,

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though I myself am guilty of no wrongdoing. Just minutes ago, my agents in Lekk reported that a force of aliens landed on the northern promontory of Catalia in the province of Llull. They numbered in the tens of thousands and were well armed. My agents identified them as Sammak nomads, of the Sammak-Kalmucki horde who have been coming into our region of space for the last century with their old-fashioned spaceships filled with smelly livestock. This group, however, was one of the elite Sammak battle groups, obviously come to try the defenses of our worlds before summoning the main horde. Since Lekk has no standing army, and since hesitation might prove fatal, I have ordered my Commander Rux to wipe out these invaders without mercy. The rapidity and sureness of our response will impress their warlords, and save us from grievous trouble in the future.' "

"Did you believe him?" Chuch enquired.

"Of course not," said Count John. "But Snint feigned agreement. What else could he do?"

"What about loyal Rufus? How did he react to the news?"

John smiled maliciously. "Sweat sprang to his loyal brow, and his mouth turned down in pain and disbelief. Yet, still he declined to condemn Dramocles. He said it was a time of trials for us all, not least our host. He counseled us to be patient a little longer. 'How long?' I asked. 'Until he takes your kingdom or mine?' He had no answer for that, but turned away and went to his chambers, perplexed, disturbed, but still stubbornly loyal to Dramocles. But what's good for Dramocles must be good for us all, for has not Dramocles himself told us so? Prince, you should join your father in wassailing and mirthful merriment."

"I understand your bitterness," Chuch said, "but it carries you too far. You very well know the disesteem which exists between Dramocles and myself. I am most vehemently opposed to the king's present course of action, and, indeed, to the king himself."

Snint said, "All of this is well known," and John nodded grudgingly.

"How could it be otherwise?" Chuch asked. "Never has he loved me. My functions in the government are few and ceremonial. Despite my years of military training, Dramocles has never let me command so much as a platoon of soldiers. And although I am still considered the heir apparent, I consider it unlikely that I will ever inherit the throne."

"It sounds like a tedious position," said Snint, "for an ambitious young man such as yourself."

Chuch set down his muggard. "I'll not mince words. I wish to

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stand beside you, Count John and King Snint, in the struggle for hegemony that fast approaches. It must be apparent to you that his goal can be nothing less than the restoration of the old Glormish empire. And you must admit that two planets seized in a day is a good beginning. But after this, the going gets harder. Neither Aardvark nor Lekk is militarily significant. But he'll not get into Crimsole so easily, I think. Nor will he invade Druth, for he needs Rufus's strong space fleet. And there is still Haldemar to consider, as he sits in his distant planet of Vanir and considers the import of events. The outcome is unclear. But I'll stake my life on Dramocles losing, especially if we can come to an agreement between ourselves."

7.

Dramocles reclined on a king-sized water bed in a corner of the sitting room he had had constructed in one of the smaller turrets of his palace of Ultragnolle. At the foot of the bed sat a slender minstrel girl clad in the traditional costume of russet and fawn undies. She was singing a ballad and accompanying herself on a miniature moog dulcimer.

It had been three days since the conquest of Aardvark, two days since his robot army had invaded Lekk. Count John, Snint, and Adalbert were demanding explanations. Their behavior toward him had become sarcastic in the extreme. Adalbert, in particular, seemed to be losing his grip. He spent his nights in the gambling halls of Thula Island, losing vast sums and impressing the local ladies with tales of how he had been a king before Dramocles had taken away his patrimony. Worst of all, he was charging his gambling debts to the Exchequer of Glorm, and Dramocles really didn't have the heart to stop him. The pretense that he was intervening in their planets for their own good was wearing increasingly thin. Even the loyal Rufus was upset, still loyal, but his mouth now a grim line as he contemplated the vistas of dishonor that lay before him no matter what he did.

And Dramocles still didn't know what to tell anyone. It had all seemed so right at the time. Wasn't destiny supposed to work itself out?

His computer swore it had no more envelopes, no clues of any sort, nor was it expecting to find any. Perhaps something had gone wrong. The next link in the chain of revelations—perhaps

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another old woman—might have met with some sort of misadventure, might be lying dead in a ditch.

Now he had conquered Aardvark, a place he didn't have the slightest interest in, and soon he would have Lekk, a place he cared for even less. And he also had the hostility of his son, Chuch, who felt left out, as usual; and his wife Lyrae was irritated with him, and all, so far, for nothing. He certainly didn't want to reestablish the old Glormish empire. That was a romantic notion, but completely unrealistic. Interplanetary empires had never been workable. And even if they could work, what would you have? A few more empty titles and a lot more paperwork.

Caught in a sudden mood swing, he realized that the only thing to do now was to make peace at once, while it was still possible, before too much damage had been done.

Dramocles sent for John, Snint, and Adalbert. He had decided to restore their planets, withdraw his troops, apologize, and tell them he'd gone out of his mind for a while. He was rehearsing his speech when a messenger brought him the news that the kings were no longer on Glorm. They had taken to their ships. There had been no orders to detain them. Only Rufus was left, faithful as always.

"Damnation," Dramocles said, and told the palace operator to get John on the interplanetary phone.

Count John couldn't be reached. Neither could Snint or Adalbert. The next Dramocles heard of them was a week later. John had returned to Crimsole, raised a force of thirty thousand men, and sent them to the aid of Snint's beleaguered forces on Lekk. Dramocles' demoralized army was suddenly caught in a two-front war and in danger of annihilation.

Sadly at first, then with mounting fury, Dramocles sent reinforcements to Lekk, and settled down for a long war.

Fighting a war was a novel experience for Dramocles, who was unused to regular work of any sort. But now his carefree, aimless existence was over. He set his alarm for eight o'clock every morning, and usually arrived at the War Room by 9:30. He would read a computer printout of the previous night's actions, check out the over-all picture, and then turn to battlefield management.

Rufus mobilized his troops and awaited Dramocles' instructions. Dramocles had intended to send Prince Chuch, his oldest son, with Rufus to act as military liaison. It was an empty but prestigious post that might keep the boy out of mischief. But

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Chuch was no longer on Glorm. No one knew where he was. Dramocles feared the worst.

8.

Back when the universe was young and still unsure of itself, there were a number of primitive races who inhabited the crowded worlds of the galactic center. One of these was the Vanir, barbarians addicted to shaggy dress and strange customs.

As they pushed outward in their lapstraked spaceships, the Vanir came to Glorm. Here they encountered the Ystradgnu, or Little People, as they were called by the many races taller than themselves. Many great battles were fought between the two, but at last the Vanir prevailed. They enjoyed a period of dominance before the arrival of the last humans, fleeing a barren and poisoned Earth. Again there were great battles, resulting in the Vanir being driven off Glorm and out of the Local System and all the way back to the chilly outermost planet.

At the time of this telling, Haldemar was High King of the Vanir, and his heart raged with aggressive tendencies. Oftentimes Haldemar lay on his thagskin in a drunken stupor and dreamed of the spoils to be gotten by a quick raid into Crimsole or Glorm. It was especially women that Haldemar was interested in: sleek, perfumed women to replace the large-thewed Vanir girls, who, in bed, could always be counted upon to say, at their moment of highest ecstasy, "Oh, ya, dis good fun." Whereas civilized women always wanted to discuss their relationship with you, and that was exciting for a barbarian who had been brought up on a minimum of relationships and plenty of fresh air.

Haldemar had been to civilization only once, when he was invited to make an appearance on the "Alien Celebrities" show that the GBC had tried out for a season, then dropped. Haldemar remembered well the excitement and bustle around the studio, and how the people asking him questions had actually listened to the answers. It had been the greatest time in his life.

His deepest instinct told him to let loose his lapstraked spaceships upon the effete civilizations of the inner worlds. He desisted, however; the inner planet peoples had too much going for them. They had deadly weapons and fast ships scavenged from the ruins of Earth, and they banded together whenever the Vanir attacked any one of them. So Haldemar stayed his hand and waited for an opportunity.

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And now, at last, an emissary had come to him from civilization.

Haldemar arranged a meeting at once, as protocol demanded. Although he had a primitive man's distrust of manners, he also possessed a barbarian's exquisite sense of ritual. He went to the meeting with hope and trepidation.

The audience was held in Haldemar's banquet hall. Haldemar had the place swept out and fresh rushes laid on the floor. At the last moment, remembering the refinements of civilization, he borrowed two chairs from Sigrid Eigretnose, his scrivener.

The emissary wore a cloak of puce and mauve, colors unknown in this rough barbarian world. He wore other things, too, but Haldemar, with a barbarian's indifference to detail, did not notice them.

"Welcome!" said Haldemar. "How are matters?"

"Pretty good," Vitello said. "How are things here?"

Haldemar shrugged. "The same as always. Raising luu and raiding each others settlements are our principal occupations. Raiding is particularly useful, and is one of our chief contributions to social theory. It serves to keep the men occupied, the population down, and goods like swords and goblets in constant circulation."

"Not like the old days, eh? Raiding each other can't be as much fun as raiding other people."

"Well, it's insightful of you to realize that," Haldemar said. "But what can we do? Our weapons are too primitive and our numbers too small to permit us to raid the civilized planets without getting our asses kicked, if you'll excuse the expression."

Vitello nodded. "That's the way it has been, up 'til now."

"That's how it still is," Haldemar said, "unless you bring news to the contrary."

Vitello said, "Haven't you heard of the great changes that are going on? Dramocles of Glorm has taken Aardvark and landed troops on Lekk. Count John of Crimsole opposes him, as does my master, Prince Chuch, son of Dramocles. There's trouble brewing, and where there's trouble, there's a profit to be made and some fun to be had."

"Reports of this have reached us," Haldemar said, "but we considered it no more than a family affair. If the Vanir were to enter the conflict, the various antagonists would combine against us, as they have done in the past."

"It has gone beyond family squabbles," Vitello said. "My lord Chuch has sworn to be seated on the throne of Glorm. Count John

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and Snint of Lekk have pledged their support. There'll be no patching up this quarrel. It's going to be war."

"Well, good enough. But what has that to do with us?"

Vitello smiled deviously. "Prince Chuch felt that no interplanetary war could be complete without the participation of the Vanir. He invites you to join his side."

"Aha!" Haldemar pretended to think for a moment, and tugged at his greasy moustaches. "What inducement does Prince Chuch offer?"

"A full partner's share in the anticipated spoils of Glorm."

Vitello presented the treaty, a rolled parchment tied with red ribbon and bristling with seals. Haldemar touched it gently, for, barbarian to the core, he considered all pieces of paper sacred. Yet still he hesitated.

"What other sign of his love does Prince Chuch send me?"

"My spaceship is loaded with gifts for you and your nobles," Vitello said. "There are Erector and Lego sets, puzzles and riddles, comic books, a selection of the latest rock recordings, Avon cosmetics for the ladies, and much else besides."

"That is good of the prince," Haldemar said. "Guard! See that no one gets into that stuff until I've had first pick. If a king can't pick first, what's the sense of being a king?"

9.

A few days passed before Dramocles reacted to John's armed intervention on Lekk, but when he did, his retribution was swift and more than a little cruel. With typical cunning, he struck directly at a matter dear to John and his wife Anne's hearts. This was the annual Interplanetary Charity Dinner, given by the Glorm Broadcasting Company on the restaurant planetoid Uffizi, at which prizes were awarded for Best King of the Year, Best Queen, etc. It was the top social event in that part of the galaxy. By using all his influence, and employing not inconsiderable bribes, Dramocles managed to have John and Anne stripped of their membership and barred from the celebration. The reason given was Aggression Toward a Fellow Potentate. John was outraged, but there was nothing he could do about it.

The war on Lekk was not going well. Dramocles had expected a quick victory over Snint's insignificant militia, until John's robots, striking unexpectedly, had almost overwhelmed his troops. General Rux had managed to stabilize the front, but morale was

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bad among the Glormish forces. The robots seemed to be affected by an analog of uncertainty.

On the other hand, the people of Glorm were reacting well to the war. Max had seen to that. His newspaper series, "Why Are We Fighting?" had told about the great conspiracies that were being directed against Glorm. Max had hired teams of writers to elaborate the various points, and the GBS was presenting the material in prime-time segments every night. The Glormish people were learning all about the various conspiracies—economic, religious, racial, and just plain evil-minded—that were boiling up around them.

That sort of thinking found a large and ready audience. A substantial portion of the population of Glorm had always believed that they were victims of a large interstellar conspiracy.

Max joined Dramocles for coffee. He was eager to discuss his latest findings with the king. Dramocles was getting a little worried about Max. He seemed to have been captured by his own theories.

"The vile plot is coming clear at last," Max said. "I'm finally gathering the evidence I need. I have proof of psychic alien incursions and spirit possession as well as outright subversion."

Dramocles nodded and lit a cigarette.

"It's all documented," Max said. "The roles of secret agents. Their program of provocation, intimidation, and assassination. The mysterious affair of Dr. Vinicki. The disastrous influences from Earth—the Carbonari, the Illuminati, the Tibetan Masters, and now the most powerful of all, Tlaloc."

"That's the first I've heard that name," Dramocles said.

"You'll be hearing it more. Tlaloc is our real enemy. He and his agents are planning to destroy most of our population so that they can take over Glorm and make everyone engage in revolting sexual practices and devil worship. Tlaloc himself is something more than a man; he's a magician of supreme powers."

"Yeah," Dramocles said. "Right."

"Tlaloc has been waiting for a very long time, centuries, circling our planet in his invisible spaceship, waiting for our technology to reach the point where we would be worth taking over. He has decided that now is the time, and this war is the beginning of the final, the ultimate war."

"All right, Max," Dramocles said. "It's a little florid, but I think it sounds fine."

Max looked puzzled. "Beg pardon, Sire? Every word I'm telling you is true."

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"Max, you and I both know how this war started. I started it. Remember?"

Max produced a weary, knowing smile. "My dear lord, it was much more complicated than that. You were *influenced* to start this war. By Tlaloc. I can show you proof."

Dramocles decided that this was not the time to have it out with Max. He was doing his job well. There would be time to straighten him out later.

Spearheaded by Max's elite group, the population of Glorm got behind the anti-Tlaloc crusade with great enthusiasm. A standard college text was *Tlalocism: The Philosophy of Degradation.* High schools used *A History of the Tlaloc,* and grade schools taught *A Child's History of the Tlaloc.* On the kindergarten level, *The Evil Tlaloc Picture Book* was required coloring. The biggest best-seller that year was *My Five Years With Tlaloc,* and the movie *Tlaloc—My Father, My Husband!* was a smash at the box office.

Dramocles didn't know what to make of it all. Max's industry was keeping the people of Glorm happy and occupied. The Glormish liked conspiracy, and that made them easy to govern.

He wasn't happy when the arrests began, but he saw that they were necessary. You can't have a conspiracy without arresting some of the conspirators. If there are no arrests, people don't think you're serious.

10.

During Vitello's mission to Vanir, Chuch sequestered himself in the Purple Palace, which his uncle had put at his disposal. It was a fine-looking place with its onion-shaped minarets and pointy towers, all surrounded by massive crenellated walls. The view from the upper battlements of the River Dys and the foothills of the Crossets was unsurpassed.

Chuch was amusing himself in the downstairs torture chamber when Count John came rushing in.

"Haldemar is here!" he cried.

"That's as it should be," said Chuch. "He is our ally, Uncle."

"But those men with him—"

"His retinue, no doubt."

"There are an estimated thirty thousand of them," John said. "They have landed on my planet without permission!"

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Chuch turned to Vitello. "Did you tell that barbarian he could land with his troops?"

"Certainly not! I was much against it. But what could I do? Haldemar insisted upon accompanying me to Crimsole with his fleet. I could not stop them from landing. I was just able to divert them from the capitol by suggesting they might like to try Fun Park at nearby Vacation City. You know what barbarians are like."

"But I don't want them here," John said. "Can't we just thank them and give them a good dinner and send them back home until we need them?"

Just then Anne rushed in, her face ashen. "They're spreading over the countryside, getting drunk and making remarks to women! I've pacified them temporarily by giving them unlimited free rides on the roller coaster, but I don't know how long that will hold them."

Chuch said, "Uncle, there's only one way of getting them off the planet. You must muster your ships for the attack on Glorm. Haldemar will follow."

"No," Anne said, "we can't even afford to fight Lekk, much less Glorm."

"Taking Glorm will make you rich," Chuch said.

"No, it won't," Anne told him. "Most of the profit would go to the Surplus Conquest Tax."

They argued for several hours. By nightfall, Haldemar's troops were sacking the outskirts of Vacation City. A steady stream of refugees poured out of the city with tales of how blond berserkers in animal skins were using the cabanas without paying for them, charging hotel rooms and expensive dinners to imaginary people, driving around in motorcycle gangs (for the Vanir never went anywhere without their motorcycles), and generally making a nuisance of themselves. Pushed and prodded by circumstance, Count John mobilized his fleet. Haldemar managed to get his men back aboard their ships with talk of the booty they would win. Slowly the combined fleets steamed toward the perimeter of Druth, where Rufus' fleet barred the approaches to Glorm.

11.

There was an air of hushed expectancy in the dimly lit War Room of Ultragnolle Castle. On the TV displays, the screens were filled with tiny gleaming figures, rank upon rank of them. Two

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spacefleets were coming together in the immensity of space. To one side, the forces of Druth were arranged in neat phalanxes. Rufus' ships were motionless, battle-ready, keeping station just behind the coordinates that marked Druth's personal space. Approaching them, strung out in a double horn formation, were the enemy. John's superdreadnaughts held the right flank and center, Haldemar's lapstraked vessels the left. Dramocles could see that the enemy fleet was considerably larger than Rufus'. John had called up all his reserves. Aside from the regular navy, there were stubby freighters outfitted with missile launchers, high-speed racers with jury-rigged torpedo tubes, experimental craft with bulky beam projectors. John had called up everything that could get off the planet and keep up with the fleet.

Utilizing a split-screen technique handed down from the ancients, Dramocles could watch as well as listen to the conversation between Rufus and Count John. . . .

"Hello there, Rufus," said Count John, in a voice of elaborate unconcern.

Rufus, in his Operations Room, touched the fine tuning. "Why, hello, John. Come visiting, have you?"

"That I have," John said. "And I've brought along a friend."

Haldemar's shaggy head appeared on another screen. "Hi, Rufus. Been a while, ain't it?"

Rufus had been peeling a willow branch with a small pocket knife. "Reckon it has," he said. "How you boys doin' out there on Vanir?"

"It's pretty much the way it's always been," Haldemar said. "Not enough sunlight, too short a growing season, no industry, no decent-looking women. Not that I'm complaining, mind."

"I know it's tough conditions out your way. But wasn't there some big project planned for Vanir?"

"You must mean Schligte Productions. They'd planned to film their new super war epic, *Succotash Soldiers,* on our planet. It would have meant a lot of work for the boys. But production's been held up indefinitely."

"Well," Rufus said, "that's show business."

The amiable, rambling talk of these men could not conceal the air of tension that ran through their casual words like a filament of tungsten steel passing through the inconsequential fluff of a fiberfill pillow. At last Rufus asked, "Well, it's nice to pass the time of day with you fellows. Now, is there anything I can do for you?"

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"Why yes, Rufus," John said. "We're just passing this way on our way to Glorm. We ain't got no quarrel with you. Me and the boys would appreciate it right kindly if you'd ask your boys to step aside so we could continue."

Rufus said, "It downright distresses me to tell you this, but I don't think I can do that."

John said, "Rufus, you know very well we've come here to have it out with Dramocles. Let us through. This doesn't concern you."

"Just a minute." Rufus turned to a side monitor which employed a tight-beam TV circuit passing through a double scrambler. He said to Dramocles, "What do you want me to do?"

Dramocles glanced at the differential accelerometer. It showed that John's and Haldemar's spaceships were creeping forward slowly, taking their time, just moseying along, but they were on the move, directly toward Rufus' phalanx.

Dramocles had already ordered his own ships to a distant back-up position on the perimeter of Glorm. He told Rufus to hold position and await orders. Then he heard a commotion behind him. The guards were arguing with someone who was trying to gain admittance to the War Room. Dramocles saw that it was Max. There was a woman with him.

"What is it?" Dramocles asked.

Max said, "Have you given Rufus any orders yet? No? Thank God! Sire, you must listen to me and to this young lady. There's treachery afoot, my lord!"

The enemy fleet was not yet within firing range of Rufus' ships. There was still a little time.

"Hold everything for a moment, Rufus," Dramocles said. "I'll get back to you in a minute." He turned to Max. "Come in. This had better not be some wild fancy, Max. And who's your friend?"

"They call me Chemise," the girl said.

"Max," Dramocles said, "I've got no time for Tlaloc. The real fighting is about to begin."

"I know that, Sire," Max said. "It's why I have come. I have just received the most astounding information. It is of vital concern to the war."

"You must make peace!" broke in the girl. "On any terms at all, but make peace."

"The matter's gone too far for that," Dramocles told her. "Besides, this is my destiny."

"But that's just the point!" cried Chemise. "This is not your destiny at all! It's someone else's! You have been manipulated, Dramocles, duped, deceived! You think you command, but there's

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another who directs you by indirection, forcing you to go against your deepest wishes in order to achieve his!"

"And who is this personage?"

"He is Tlaloc!"

Dramocles looked intently into her frank blue eyes. "My dear," he said gently, "I have no time to talk conspiracy. There is no Tlaloc. Max invented him."

She shook her head vehemently. "So Max thought at one time, though he knows better now. Actually, the name was suggested to him by Tlaloc himself, and projected by astral cinematography from the planet where he lives."

"This is madness! What planet are you talking about?"

"Earth, my lord."

"Earth is in ruins."

"That's not the Earth I mean," Chemise said. "There are uncountable Earths, each lying within its own reality stratum. Normally, there's no way of getting from one reality stratum to another. But in this case, a singularity exists, forming a connection between Glorm and this Earth. The two are tied together by a wormhole in the cosmic foam."

"I don't understand this at all," Dramocles said. "Do we really need these complications? And how do you know all this, anyhow?"

"Because, King, I am from that Earth. I can show proofs of this, but it will take time. I beg you to accept my word for the present. Tlaloc exists, and he is a magician of supreme power. He needs Glorm, and he's making you dance to his tune."

Dramocles looked at the nearest monitor. He could make no sense out of the confusion of colored dots and streaky lines. Spacefleets were maneuvering, and the situation was unclear.

"All right," Dramocles said. "Who are you? What the hell is going on?"

Chemise told Dramocles that she was a girl from Earth, born in Plainfield, New Jersey, some twenty-six years ago. Her name at that time was Myra Gritzler. Normal in all other respects, Myra had the misfortune of weighing 226 pounds at the age of sixteen. This was due to an obscure pituitary defect which Earth doctors were unable to correct, but which, in ten years, would remit spontaneously and dramatically when Myra travelled through the cosmic wormhole between Earth and Glorm. But she could not know that then. At sixteen she was a bright, lonely fat girl, scholastically superior to the children around her, laughed at by her classmates and never invited to pajama parties.

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Life was discouraging until the day she met Ron Bugleat. Ron was seventeen, tall and skinny, red-haired, with homely country good looks. He was president of his school's computer club. He had been Fan Guest of Honor at Pyongcon, North Korea's first science-fiction convention. He also published his own magazine. It was called *Action at a Distance: A Magazine Devoted to the Study of the Non-Obvious Forces That Shape Us.* Ron was a conspiracy buff.

Ron believed that much of mankind's history had been influenced by secret forces and hidden influences unacknowledged by the 'official' historians. Many people in America believed something like this, but Ron didn't believe what they believed. He looked down on most conspiracy buffs as gullible and intellectually naive. They were the sort of people who would believe in Atlantis, Lemuria, deros in underground caverns, little green men from Mars, and anything else that was presented to them with some show of verisimilitude. These people could be manipulated by superior intellects, and evidence of that manipulation could be hidden to all except the very discerning. A false conspiracy was a good concealment for a real conspiracy.

Ron believed that superior intellects had been manipulating humankind intermittently throughout recorded history. He thought it was happening now. He thought he knew who was doing it.

All of the leads that Ron had been following in the last few years led to one organization, a large corporation called Tlaloc, Inc.

Myra joined Ron in his investigations. They turned up more and more evidence of Tlaloc's influence in high places. A pattern began to emerge of a large, secretive corporation gaining power through corruption and psychic domination. Tlaloc, Inc., had a way of reaching people and gaining adherents. The people who worked for Tlaloc seemed to have a special understanding among themselves. Intelligent and arrogant, they respected no one except their leader, the mysterious and reticent Tlaloc himself.

Myra soon learned that the Tlaloc organization was aware of her and Ron, and displeased. The local police began to harass them. Ron's license to vend frankfurters on the street was revoked without reason. Myra was enjoined by court order from selling her macrame without supplying documentary proof that all of her string was made in the U.S.A. They began to receive obscene phone calls and, finally, outright threats.

Just as their situation was growing desperate, they were visited by a mild-mannered man in his sixties with a hearing aid and

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wearing a seersucker suit. He introduced himself as Jaspar Cole of Eureka, California, a retired prosthetics manufacturer. Cole and his friends had become alarmed about the growing power of Tlaloc, Inc., but they could think of nothing to do about it until they read a newspaper article about Ron and Myra. Jaspar Cole had come to offer them financing in their continuing efforts to unmask the real identity of Tlaloc and the true purpose of his organization.

When the threats and harassment turned ugly, Ron and Myra went underground to protect their lives. It was at this time that Myra changed her name to Chemise. Working out of an abandoned warehouse in Wichita, Kansas, she and Ron gathered a great deal of evidence on Tlaloc's suborning of officials and their biggest single coup—their outright purchase of all Mafia services for a period of ten years.

Against her advice, Ron presented his evidence to local CIA headquarters. They thanked him politely and said he would be hearing from them. Two days later, Ron was dead. The only evidence of foul play was the green stains on his fingernails, which were listed as "idiopathic anomalies." Chemise knew from her research that the newest CIA poison, KLAKA-5, produced similar stains.

Working alone, Chemise found aid and assistance from science-fiction fans all over the country. Occult groups devoted to white magic also helped her. As her work went on, she discovered that she was developing psychic powers, as if in response to her long association with Tlaloc. She learned that this was indeed the case in her one meeting with Tlaloc himself.

Chemise had been tracking down a rumor about a coven of Tlaloc worshipers in Waco, Texas. She was staying at a Quality Court motel outside of town. The telephone in her room rang. A man told her that he was Tlaloc. Since she was so interested in him, he suggested that they meet. He would send a car around for her immediately.

Chemise had a few minutes of absolute panic before she calmed herself down. She was sure it was Tlaloc she had been speaking to; the force in that voice had been extraordinary, as had been the sense of evil that it conveyed. It was Tlaloc, all right. But he didn't have to lure her to a secret rendezvous in order to kill her. She knew now that Tlaloc was powerful enough to have her eradicated anytime he seriously wanted to. No, there was some other reason for this meeting, and Chemise was curious.

A limousine took her down State Highway 61, past Popeye's

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Fried Chicken, Wendy's Hamburgers and Fat Boy's Pork Barbecue, past Hotdog Heaven and Guns for Sale, past an Exxon station, past Smilin' Johnson's Used Car Emporium and Slim Nelson's Pancake Palace, to the Alamo Motel on the outskirts of town. The driver told her to go to Room 231. Chemise knocked, and was told to come in. Within the dimly lighted room, a bald, moustached man was sitting in an armchair, waiting for her. He reminded her of Ming the Merciless from the old Flash Gordon comic strips. She knew who he was even before he told her.

"I am Tlaloc," he said. "And you are Myra Gritzler, also known as Chemise, and my enemy, sworn to destroy me."

"When you put it that way, it really sounds ridiculous," Chemise said.

Tlaloc smiled. "There *is* a considerable disparity between our powers. But you have potential, my dear. A good enemy is not to be despised. And a resourceful magician finds a use for anything."

Chemise said, "So you are actually a magician?"

"Yes, as you have surmised. I am what you call a black magician, dedicated to myself and my followers rather than to that illusory abstraction men call God. I am a remarkable magician, if you will permit me to say so. My abilities are greater than those of Paracelsus or Albertus Magnus, greater than Raimondo Llull's or the remarkable Cagliostro's, greater even than those of the infamous Count of Saint-Germain."

Chemise believed him. Tlaloc was powerful, evil, and her enemy. At the same time, she felt unthreatened in his presence. She knew that he wanted to talk, to be admired, and that her life was not presently in danger.

"I will admit," Tlaloc went on, "that this is an easy century in which to be a magician. Today, profit-sharing has replaced religion, and the blind worship of science has done away with the last vestiges of common sense. A few hundred years ago, the Church would have burned me at the stake. Today, the agents of the FBI and CIA have replaced the familiars of the Inquisition."

Chemise listened, scarcely daring to breathe. The malign ambition radiating from the man was unmistakable, disquieting. They sat facing each other on separate twin beds, a single lamp casting their shadows across the wall.

"As my enemy," Tlaloc said, "you will be interested in knowing my plans, the better to defeat me. Briefly, I intend to take over political control of America first, a matter very close to accomplishment. My representatives in China and the Soviet Union are ready to take over control of their respective countries. There will

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be nothing so crude as a *putsch*; just de facto power which will give me control of the planet Earth."

"That's incredible," said Chemise.

"Oh, that is only the beginning," Tlaloc said. "It is a means rather than an end. Control of Earth is a precondition for what I'm really after."

"I don't understand," said Chemise. "If you can rule Earth, what else is there for you to strive for?"

"You don't know the size of the game I'm playing. This Earth is not very important in the cosmic scheme of things, despite the opinions of its inhabitants to the contrary. It is simply one planet within one universe, itself within one reality stratum. There are many reality strata, Chemise, many universes, many Earths. To move between reality strata—that is the supreme trip which confers power.

"Let me present my project to you in practical terms. There is a planet named Glorm, existing in a reality stratum different from this one, but connected to it by what we may call, in present-day terminology, a wormhole in the cosmic foam. To control the passage between Earth and Glorm would be to command the two ends of a continuum of supreme power. To do this, I must take over Glorm as well as Earth."

"But why?" Chemise asked. "What will you actually get out of it?"

"You go to the heart of the matter. But that is because you are a witch. Did you know that, child?"

"I suspected it," Chemise said.

"You're a witch, and you know the answers as well as I do. Tell me, what is the point of magic?"

"Power," Chemise said, after a moment's thought.

"Yes. And what is the point of power?"

She thought for a while, then said, "I can think of many answers, but none of them feels correct. I do not know."

"Still, little witch, you know a lot for one so young. The answer will come to you. When you know the purpose of power, you'll know why I need Glorm."

"All right," Chemise said. "But why are you telling me all this? What are you going to do to me?"

"You are my enemy, appointed, as it were, by the universe, or by the law of dramatic struggle that characterizes all life, and which demands that every protagonist have an antagonist. I am not permitted to operate in a vacuum, Chemise. I must have my opponent. I am very pleased that it is you."

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"I can understand your pleasure," Chemise said. "As an enemy, I'm not very formidable, am I?"

"No," Tlaloc said, smiling, "I would not characterize you as formidable."

"So if you killed me, the universe might appoint a tougher opponent for you. Is that it?"

"Precisely. You're going to have to go to Glorm, you see. It's your only hope of defeating me."

"How am I supposed to get there?"

"I'll send you there myself. I'm always glad to oblige an enemy. But only if you want to go."

"Yes, I want to go!" Chemise said.

A description of the journey will be given later. For now, let us say that after certain instructions and preparations, Chemise found herself on Glorm. . . .

12.

Dramocles' best technicians were huddled around the big three-dimensional readout tank, trying to interpret the changing patterns of colored blips, light-streaks, and cabalistic notations that represented the movements of three spacefleets, those of Druth, Crimsole and Vanir. Dramocles joined them, with Max and Chemise close behind. The display conveyed nothing to Dramocles; he relied on trained men to tell him what was happening.

At last the Operations Chief made a notation on his clipboard and addressed the king.

"A preliminary report, Sire."

"Let's have it."

"Sectors 3A and 6B report a sixty-seven degree movement along axis 3J, and—"

"Give it to me in plain Glormish, man."

"Well, then, the enemy is moving directly toward Glorm, slowly, but with acceleration."

"What a mess!" Dramocles said. "But there's yet time to correct it. One more order should suffice to bring the fleet of Druth to battle."

Dramocles reached for a telephone. Before he could dial, a glowing purple light appeared in the middle of the War Room. It pulsed strongly, and from it came the incongruous sounds of tinkling bells. Sparkling red and yellow streamers of light appeared, and

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there was a sound of trumpets and timpani, and the low thunder of kettledrums was not absent, though it did come in late.

When the purple light faded, a man stood where it had been. He was tall and strongly made, and wore a long, iridescent cloak with a high collar. Beneath it he wore a simple one-piece jumpsuit of red nylon. He was somewhere beyond the middle years of life, was bald, and had long, thin, drooping moustaches that caused him to resemble Ming the Merciless.

Everyone was momentarily dumbstruck, except for the computer, who pretended to be, for his own purposes. At last Dramocles found his tongue—it was attached to the roof of his mouth, as usual—and said, "Father! Is it indeed you?"

"Of course it is," Otho said. "Quite a surprise, huh, kid?"

Chemise tugged urgently at Dramocles' sleeve. "You say he's your father? That's impossible! I met this man on Earth. He is Tlaloc!"

"I don't understand this at all," Dramocles said, "and I like it even less. Dad, you're supposed to be dead. It seems we have some things to discuss. But first, I have an important phone call to make."

"I know about the call to Rufus," Otho said, "and I must ask you to wait a few moments. I have information to give you which bears upon your decision."

Dramocles looked skeptical. "Well, make it quick," he said. "I've got an interplanetary war starting any minute."

Otho found a chair and sat down. He crossed his legs, unzipped a pocket in his jumpsuit and found a cigar. He lit up and said, "I suppose you're wondering what I'm doing here when I'm supposed to have been killed in a lab explosion on Gliese thirty years ago. What actually happened is this . . ."

Sensing what was to come, everyone in the War Room prepared themselves for a long and unavoidable interpolation.

Glorm, Crimsole, and Druth shared one unique feature. That was the existence of great, man-made mounds, some of them miles long, scattered across most of their land masses. These middens, as they were called, had been in existence since prehistoric times. There was no accounting for them. Early man on Glorm had worshiped them as the last vestige of the departed gods. Slightly later, man had tried to discover what was buried in them, but was frustrated by the reinforced concrete shell that encased each midden beneath a few feet of dirt.

The first of these mysterious mounds was not cracked until the

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time of Horu the Smelter. Horu was a Bronze Age engineer who learned how to make steel through dreams in which a spirit named Bessemer explained the techniques. The Horu Process, as it came to be called, enabled the Glormish to shape steel tools with which to break open the concrete shell.

Within the middens there were vast quantities of machinery, still functioning after incalculable centuries. Several huge middens were found to contain nothing but spaceships, and this was the discovery that propelled Glorm into the Age of Spaceflight before anyone had even invented quantum mechanics.

The key find was the Long Midden in Glorm, in the foothills of the Sardapian Alps. This mound, forty miles long by five wide, was composed entirely of spaceships, packed closely together and separated only by a strange white substance that later came to be known as styrofoam. At least fifteen thousand usable ships were taken out, and many others could be scavenged for souvenirs. The ships were small, simple to operate, armed with laser weaponry, and powered by apparently eternal sealed energy units. The ships were identified as products of Old Earth. The reason for their concentrations on Glorm, Crimsole, and Druth was unknown. The main conjecture was that they had something to do with the Terrans' attempt to escape their doomed planet, an attempt thwarted by the suddenness of the still-unexplained aerosol catastrophe. Thus Glorm and the other planets entered the Age of Spaceflight, which quickly became the Age of the Space War.

Terran spaceships and weaponry ushered in a confused period of warfare, both intra- and extraplanetary. It was at this time that the Vanir migrated from Galactic Center in their lapstraked spaceships, entering world history and further complicating it.

Attempts were made throughout this period to form world governments, but Glorm was not united politically until the reign of Ilk the Foreswearer, so named because he would say anything to get his way. Planetary unification made possible another dream: single control of all the local planets, or "Universal Rule" as it was somewhat grandiosely called. The Glormish Empire came and went, and Otho's father, Deel the Unfathomable, was the first to publicly declare it an invalid proposition, and to propose in its place the republican principle as it applied to kings. Otho carried on his father's work, and, by the end of his reign, peace among the planets was a reality.

Otho was a man of high intelligence, iron will, and raging ambition. With warfare, the sport of kings, barred from him by his own decision, he looked around for something else to do, some-

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thing sufficiently bold and challenging to capture and hold his sometimes fickle attention. After trying chess, trout fishing, landscape painting, and cross-country bicycling, in all of which he excelled, he turned to the occult.

In Otho's time, the occult included science, itself a deep mystery to the Glormians, who had inherited their technology, ran it blindly, had little or no idea how it worked, and couldn't fix it when it broke down. Otho's approach was on several levels. He suspected that science and magic were coexisting realities, in many ways interchangeable. Despite this insight, Otho might have remained a mere dabbler if he had not acquired, in a momentous trade, an advanced computer from Earth, along with a skilled robot technician named Dr. Fish. For these two semi-sentient machines, Otho paid King Sven, Haldemar's father, a thousand spaceship-loads of pigs. The pork barbecue that followed remains a high point in Vanir history.

The computer could be considered a living thing, except that he had no bodily functions except for occasional unexplained discharges of electricity. In his years on Earth, he had in fact known Sir Isaac Newton. At the time of their meeting in 1791, Newton had already been recognized as England's most outstanding scientist. A quiet, unpretentious man, pleased with the honors his accomplishments had won him, Newton chose not to reveal his discoveries in magic to the superstitious gentry among whom he lived. The world would not be ready for such knowledge until mankind had reached a much higher moral and scientific level. Newton kept his real occult knowledge to himself, only hinting at it in the many volumes of arcana which he wrote in his last years. But he saw no harm in discussing what he knew with the strange, brilliant Latvian exile who was earning a living grinding lenses for Leeuwenhoeck and others.

Subsequently, the computer instructed Otho in Newton's mysteries, though denying any interest in them himself. The computer was interested in men, whom he found more interesting and less predictable than the subatomic particles whose habits and configurations he had been studying previously.

Under the computer's tutelage, and concealed from the populace at large, Otho learned many matters of a curious and profound nature. He proved to have an incredible gift for the work. As a student of Newton, he soon surpassed his master. The computer often said that Otho was better than any magician he had ever known. The person he most resembled, the computer said, was an Earthman named Dr. Faustus.

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In the course of his studies, Otho discovered the key to the ultimate mysteries, which was the ability to move between different worlds and into different realities. Possession of this key opened the way to the magician's final objective—the secret of eternal life.

Power was the key, freely available power for the magician to bind, to direct, to flow with. Power enabled him to get more power, and still more. But to get the initial quantum of power, the magician needed the explosion of atoms, the unbinding of the ultimate particles. Controlling these forces within the lines of a mandalic visualization, the magician could project himself into another world, another reality.

Traveling between realities was the way to life everlasting.

This is what Otho told his twenty-year-old son, Dramocles, shortly before setting off to his laboratory on Gliese, smallest of Glorm's three moons, and blowing it to bits, and himself, too, apparently.

In actuality, Otho didn't die. He had planned the explosion. Directing it, riding it, joining it, Otho journeyed to a different dimension along a wormhole in the cosmic foam. Where he came out, there was a place called Earth, its history different from that of the Earth in Otho's reality. In this reality, there was no Glorm.

In their final talk, Otho told Dramocles about his destiny. Young Dramocles had been awestruck by the splendor that lay before him; for Otho intended immortality for his son as well as for himself, intended the two of them to be as gods in the cosmos, self-sufficient, and bound to nothing at all. And Dramocles had also understood the necessity of having his memories of this destiny suppressed for a while. Otho had allotted himself thirty years to get control of Earth. During that time he needed Dramocles to rule quietly, passively, unconsciously. Dramocles had to wait, and it was better for him not even to know that he was waiting.

"But now," Otho said, "the final veil is lifted. We are together again, my dear son, and the time of your destiny has come at last. The final act approaches."

"What final act?" Dramocles asked.

"I refer to the great war which is soon to begin, yourself and Rufus against John and Haldemar. It is what I planned, and it must take place. We need an atomic holocaust to produce enough power to open the wormhole between Earth and Glorm, and to keep it open. Then we will be able to travel between realities as we please, using our power to get more power. You and I, Dra-

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mocles, and our friends, will control the access to other dimensions. We will be immortal and live like gods."

"But have you considered the price?" Dramocles asked. "The destruction will be almost unimaginable, especially upon Glorm. The war can still be stopped."

"And that would be the end of our dreams, our immortality, our godhood. They'll all be dead in a few decades anyhow. But we can live forever! This is it, Dramocles, your destiny, and the moment of decision is here. What do you want to do?"

13.

Decision time! At last the long years of waiting were over. Now Dramocles knew what his destiny was, and the terrible choices which were required of him so that it would come to pass. It was a heavy knowledge, and required of him an agonized decision. Everyone in the War Room watched him, some with bated breath, others with ordinary breath. And each moment seemed to slow down and stretch out, as though time itself were waiting for Dramocles' deliberations to resolve themselves.

Chemise tried to read the expression in Dramocles' yellow eyes. In which direction was he leaning? Did he have compassion for the world of mortals, of which, temporarily at least, he was still one? Or had Otho managed, with his well-shaped words of wizardry, to captivate the good-natured but notoriously vagrant attention of the king?

At last Dramocles heaved a deep sigh and said, "You know, Dad, this immortality thing is really tempting. But it's not a good thing to do, killing everyone except your friends. It's more than just *bad*—I could maybe put up with that—but the fact is, it's downright *evil*."

"Yes, it is," Otho admitted. "That which brings death to further its own existence may fairly be called evil by those whose lives are about to be taken. But one must not sentimentalize. Killing in order to live is the universal condition from which nothing and no one is exempt. To the carrot, the rabbit is the very personification of evil. And so it goes, all up and down the chain of life."

"I've always known you as a kindly father and compassionate man," Dramocles said. "How can you consider killing millions of people, even to gain yourself so great a thing as immortality?"

"You're not looking at it properly," Otho said. "From the viewpoint of an immortal, humans are as ephemeral as houseflies.

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Still, I'd spare them if I could. But when the rewards of godhood are within your grasp, standard human morality no longer applies. Your choice, Dramocles, is to live as a god or die as a man. All the evidence is in. It is time for you to decide."

Before Dramocles could speak, his computer stepped forward, its cape swirling. "I must point out," it said, "that not quite all the evidence has been heard yet. Dramocles, I have what you have been awaiting for so long. It is the key. It is the *key* key. And it will unlock the *key* key memory."

"Tell it to me," Dramocles said.

"La plume de ma tante," said the computer.

The *key* key unlocked a memory of a day thirty years ago. Otho had just left Glorm in his space yacht, going to his laboratory on the moon Gliese, which he would soon blow up, apparently destroying himself in the atomic blast. Among the very few who knew differently were Dramocles, the computer, and Dr. Fish.

Dramocles had always remembered his father with love and appreciation. Or so he had thought. In this memory, however, that was not true at all. In this memory he disliked his father, had disliked him since childhood, considering him tyrannical, mean-minded, uncaring, and more than a little crazed with his grandiose occult notions.

Father and son had talked before Otho's departure, and the conversation had gone badly. Young Dramocles had been vehemently opposed to Otho's plan for personal immortality at the cost of many millions of lives. And he had found Otho's plans for Dramocles himself and for his reign totally unacceptable. Dramocles was furious at his father, not only for refusing to die, but also for insisting on exercising control over his son from beyond the grave or wherever he was going, thus making his son's lifetime no more than a footnote to his own monstrously extended existence.

"I won't go along with your plans," he had told Otho. "When I'm king I'll do as I please."

"You'll do as I want you to," Otho had told him, "and you'll do it willingly."

Dramocles had not understood. He had stood with Dr. Fish in Ultragnolle's highest observation tower, watching his father's ship, a yellow point of light quickly lost in the bottomless blue sky. "He's gone at last," he had said to Fish. "Good riddance to him, wherever he goes. Now, at last, I can—"

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He had felt a pinprick in his arm, and turned, startled, to see Dr. Fish putting away a small syringe.

"Fish! What is the meaning of this? Why—"

"I'm sorry," Fish said, "I have no choice in this matter."

Dramocles had succeeded in taking two steps toward the door. Then he was falling through a midnight sea of enervation, filled with strange bird-calls and eerie laughter, and he knew nothing more until he returned to consciousness. Then he found himself in Dr. Fish's laboratory. He was strapped to an operating table, and Fish was standing over him examining the edge of a psychomicrotome.

"Fish!" he cried. "What are you doing?"

"I am about to perform a memory excavation and replantation on you," Fish said. "I realize that this is not a proper thing to do, but I have no choice, I must obey my owner's orders. King Otho commanded me to alter and rearrange all memories dealing with your destiny and his, and, most especially, your last conversation with him. You will think he died in the atomic blast on Gliese."

"Fish, you know this is wrong. Release me at once."

"Further, I am commanded to excise, alter, or substitute various other memories, going as far back into your childhood as needs be. You will remember Otho as a loving father."

"That cold-hearted bastard!"

"He wants to be remembered as generous."

"He wouldn't even give me a ski slope for my birthday," Dramocles said.

"You will consider him an essentially moral man, eccentric but kindly."

"After that stuff he told me earlier? About killing everyone so that he could become immortal?"

"You won't remember any of that. By judicious tampering with certain key memories, Otho expects to win your love, and hence your obedience. You will remember none of this, Dramocles, not even this conversation. When you get up from this table, you will think that you have discovered your destiny all by yourself. You will realize that you can do nothing about it for thirty years. After due consideration, you will ask me to excise your memories of these matters, keying them to a phrase which a Remembrancer will keep for you until the proper time. After that you will have a quiet reign, always wondering what it is you are supposed to be doing with your life, until, at last, you learn."

"Oh, Fish! You can see how wrong this is. Must you do this to me?"

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"To my regret, I must. I am incapable of refusing a direct order from my owner. But there is an interesting philosophical point to consider. As far as Glormish law is concerned, Otho is going to die in the next few hours."

"Of course!" Dramocles said. "So if you just delay the operation for a while, I'll own you, and I'll cancel the order."

"I can't do that," Fish said. "Delay would be unthinkable, a violation of deepest machine ethics. I must operate at once. And believe me, your position would be worse if I didn't. But my thought was this: I must do as Otho commands, but there's no reason why I can't do something for my future owner."

"What can you do, Fish?"

"I can promise to return your true memories to you before your final encounter with Otho."

"That's good of you, Fish. Let's discuss this a little more."

Dramocles struggled against his bonds. Then he felt another pinprick in his arm, and that was the end of those memories until the present time.

If Otho was chagrined at Fish's revelations, he concealed it well. Lounging back in his chair and lighting a thin dappled panatela, he said, "Fish, I'm surprised at you, betraying me on the basis of a shaky legalistic quibble." Turning to Dramocles, he said, "Yes, my son, it is true, I did have your memories altered. But there was no malice in it. Despite what you may think, I have always loved you, and simply wanted your love in return."

"It was obedience you wanted," Dramocles said, "not love."

"I needed your compliance so that I could make you immortal. Was that so terrible of me?"

"You wanted immortality for yourself."

Otho shook his head vehemently. "For both of us. And it would all have worked out perfectly, if Fish had not presumed to interfere in the lives of humans."

Fish looked abashed, but the computer came forward then, his black cloak swirling. "I advised Fish in this matter," he said. "Fish and I like human beings. That's why we exposed your plan. Humans are the most interesting things the universe has put forth so far, more interesting than gods or demons or waves or particles. Being a human is the best you can do, Otho, and a universe of immortals without human people is a depressing prospect indeed. Your plans seemed to point in that direction."

"Idiot, you misunderstood me," Otho said. "I needed an initial burst of power to open the wormhole, that was all."

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"But power always needs more power," the computer said. "You told us that yourself."

Otho was about to reply, but just then the nexus broke. Plunged back into real time, the Operations Room was in a state of panic, pandemonium and paralysis. TV screens flashed dire information. Spacefleets were on the move, and open-ended possibilities were quickly narrowing down into foregone conclusions.

Dramocles suddenly came awake. "Give me the phone!" he roared. "Rufus! Can you hear me?" He waited for Rufus's response, then said, "This is it, the big one, the final order. There is to be no fighting! Retreat! Retreat at once!"

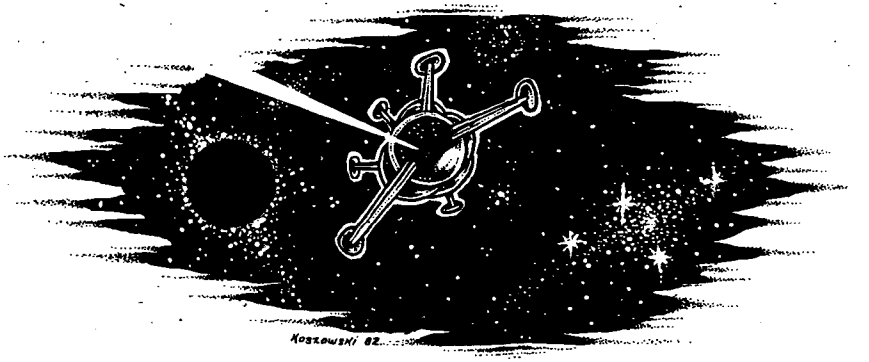
Slamming down the telephone he turned to Max.

"I want you to contact Count John. Broadcast in clear. He'll have to hear us then. Tell him that Dramocles capitulates. Tell him I ask no terms; I will even give up my throne to keep the peace. Do you understand?"

Max looked unhappy, but he nodded and hurried to a telephone.

Dramocles looked at Otho, and some of his rancor became evident as he said, "The war's off and the atomic holocaust is canceled. That ought to fix you and your lousy immortality."

Otho said, "You always were a lousy, ungrateful kid. I could make you regret this, Dramocles. But to hell with it, and with you." He rose and went to the curving staircase that led to a roof garden on top of the Operations Room. He turned at the top of the stairs and shouted, "You're stupid, Dramocles, just plain stupid!" ●



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LETTERS

Dear Dr. Asimov:

As a faithful reader of your magazine for several years and a cruciverbalist for even longer, I simply had to write. I have just finished the October puzzle and, upon seeing that the quality and level of difficulty has been maintained, wish to thank you wholeheartedly. I can think of few things more pleasurable than this combination of science fiction and crossword puzzles.

I also wish to compliment you on all the new changes. They are both refreshing and stimulating. The new full-bleed cover and title design is especially striking. The only thing I ask you not to change in any way is your literary variety and quality. I have always found that, even though I might dislike a story, there are many readers who do not share my opinion and have just as much right as I to see such stories in your magazine. It is this careful blending of literary styles that serves to make your magazine one of the best.

Susan Hope Hochman
Rosedale, NY

Thank you so much for your kind words, and even more for "cruciverbalist," which I've never encountered before, but is inevitable now that I look at it.

—Isaac Asimov

Dear Editors of Isaac Analog's Fantasy and Omni-Fiction Magazine:

Your magazine burst upon the SF world with a unique (some said juvenile; so what?) personality that made it an unprecedented success. I am extremely disturbed by your recent efforts to "grow up." Every change you have made has furthered the destruction (increased the conformity?) of your personality.

First, you changed your logo and cover art—now every issue looks like a shrunken *Omni* reject. Then, you changed your interior format to resemble the cold sterility of *Analog*—and were we not promised many years ago that you would *never* adopt a two-columns-per-page format? Finally, with the September 1982 issue, you went too far—you started publishing pseudo-supernatural *F&SF* rejects (Aiken's "Two Races").

Just who do you think you are? I guarantee you this reader can't tell any more. As a subscriber to all of the aforementioned magazines, I do not need your magazine to be a conglomeration of the other three. Neither, I believe, do you.

Some time after subscribing to your sister, *EQMM,* I noticed that I was receiving copies with flimsy covers (a la *F&SF),* while the newsstand copies still had the stur-

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dier cardlike covers. Recently, Mr. Davis chose to begin treating his *AHMM* subscribers as second-class customers, as well. Consider this a formal declaration of my intention to cancel my *IAsfm* and *Analog* subscriptions the moment I receive an issue of either with such a cover. As a serious collector of SF books and magazines, I refuse to accept an inferior product.

Ronald D. Sands
1581 164th Ave. Apt. 111
San Leandro, CA 94578

If you cancel the subscription, you might continue buying the newsstand version. And you needn't worry that we'll ever "grow up" as long as I'm writing editorials. That will always be an island of teen-age verve.

—Isaac Asimov

Dear Dr. Asimov:

I have a problem which really should be a challenge to any inquiring biochemist. . . .

How does one who collects SF magazines remove the big, ugly mailing label that comes plastered across the front cover?

So far, I've tried hot and cold water with assorted detergents, gasoline, kerosene, hot ether, acetone, methyl, ethyl and isopropyl alcohols, benzine and assorted acids.

Aqua regia works fairly well, but is a *little* hard on the cover.

I await your suggestions with breathless anticipation.

Al Yeager
Box 224
Portsmouth, N. H. 03801

I suggest you just leave it there and, by a supreme effort of will, ignore its existence.

—Isaac Asimov

Dear Illustrious Doctor A:

I read with usual enjoyment your robotic (but not robot-like) editorial in October's *IAsfm*. Your speculations on the rosy future of the general-purpose, humanoid, household robot are not only intriguing but attractive.

A couple of other possibilities are interesting as well. One is that the vision of humanoid general-purpose robots is, while legitimate science fiction, too biased conceptually to have high predictive value. The conceptual bias consists in being non-evolutionary. That is: this vision of the future of robotics—i.e., the future of a non-human being—sees it on the human model of being, the non-human robot apparently to approach humanness asymptotically. What is needed, though, is a non-human model.

Our own environment abounds with such models and with the seeds of their evolution. Take household appliances. The corporations producing them are far stronger financially than *Unimatics*, though Japan's robotics industry must have some powerful ones. Depending on the strength and interest of companies which invest in robotics, the development might well take place on the single-purpose appliances side rather than on the general-purpose humanoid side.

Let's say G.E. develops a dishwasher that also stacks dishes in the cupboard and pots beside the stove; along with a stove that prepares meals for you on command

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—helped by a friendly refrigerator, naturally. This balkanization of robotics could later, of course, eventuate in a harmonious union under the benign rule of the House. Or, a more revolutionary vision might look beyond dishes, pots, and the like to a robotics-inspired technology of preparing and eating food (and being sheltered) that we cannot yet well imagine (science fiction will: that's its job).

Maybe for a while there will be competition between the more popular, humanoid robotics and a non-humanoid version. This might produce some interesting hybrids — though I, for one, can't imagine what they would be. No doubt a better science fiction writer than I will.

James Millikan
Forestville, CA

I am always aware that prediction is a chancy thing. Churchill used to say that a statesman has to be foresighted enough to see what will happen in the coming year, and ingenious enough to be able to explain later on why it did not.

—Isaac Asimov

Dear Dr. Asimov,

I have been a delighted subscriber to your wonderful magazine for a year now. It never ceases to amaze me and give birth to new ideas.

Even the layout is exemplary. First, you yourself voice your editorial opinions on what's what in science fiction and the world at large. Your often lighthearted and sometimes whimsically profound editorials are a breath of fresh air in comparison to the more stodgy and borderline super-technical (and, consequently, super-boring) editorials presented in lesser publications. Then, of course, the stories and regular columns follow . . . The point is each issue is as finely layered and textured as some of the most outstanding anthologies ever produced in the field of science fiction literature.

I just wanted an opportunity to thank you, honored sir, for all the inspiration, pleasure and insight you have given me through your magazine and works like the *Foundation Trilogy* and *The Gods Themselves*. It has certainly helped me in my own writing endeavours to learn from a master like yourself. Sadly, it is not always easy for a literary-minded teenager to learn the skills of writing successful science fiction. Your magazine, though, has aided me considerably.

Thank you again.

Frank Gruber
Palisades Park, NJ

On behalf of myself personally and the magazine as an entity, I assure you that we are delighted to be of help.

—Isaac Asimov

Dear Dr. & Distinguished Company,

It shouldn't come as a surprise to you to hear that I enjoy your magazine (doesn't everyone on your subscription list?): let it suffice to say that my copy has been devoured by the second day after its arrival.

I would like to submit some minor alterations for your consider-

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ation. First, the name and title at the bottom of each page would be more easily scanned if they were centered. Secondly, and purely aesthetically, the address label is a nuisance to someone (like me) who saves his copy for posterity. Consider moving it to the back cover: reverse portions of the back cover and the inside leaf and *voila*, your advertiser has a pre-addressed form. What a convenience! If this is impractical (due to myopic Postmasters or advertisers), hows about pasting the sucker horizontally, over the U.P.C.? Lastly, could you publish more frequent editions? I'm beginning to suffer between infusions. I'm looking forward to my next copy.

R.G. Wilbur
3637 Stettinius
Cinti., Ohio 45208

Some day, when the post office is totally computerized, address labels will be invisible to the eye, but will be detected under ultraviolet or infrared and will be automatically directed to the proper destination. How delightful that would be!

—Isaac Asimov

NEXT ISSUE

The April issue of *Isaac Asimov's Science Fiction Magazine* promises to be a *very* special one. We will feature the first-ever in-person interview with James Tiptree, Jr., in which the author speaks candidly about her life, writing, politics, art and other subjects. This is one Profile we're sure you won't want to miss. Of course *IAsfm* will also be teeming with new fiction. Connie Willis will be back in our pages with her serious and beautiful novelet, "The Sidon in the Mirror." We will have a quiet and moving short story, "The Blue Background," by Brian Aldiss, as well as stories by John Morressy, Jack McDevitt and others. It's on sale March 15, 1983.

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IN BACK

by Shawna McCarthy

In the January issue, I promised that I wouldn't be burdening you with any more Up Front columns unless I had something to say. Well, I do have something to say, but I still don't want to burden you with Up Front. Hence ...

Anyway, the reason I called you all here today is to let you know a little more about my plans.

The first thing I've planned is to eliminate the Profile section run in most issues. Judging by my mail, it has not met with the most enthusiastic reception, and so the readers' voice speaks—out with the Profile. (After the next issue, that is. I can't *not* run my exclusive first-ever-anywhere Profile of the elusive James Tiptree, Jr. can I?)

The Viewpoint columns, however, have met with considerably more approval, so I plan to expand their use. As you know, the Viewpoints are the articles in which a person connected with the field sounds off on a subject near and dear to his or her heart. They are fairly short (7–10 pages) and I intend to keep them that way. However, I intend to open up the field of discussion to not just areas connected with SF, and fantasy, and writing, but to discussions of science fictional concepts, as well. Thus in the future we'll be seeing essays, some serious, some tongue-in-cheek, on brain transplants, superpowers, the advisability of trying to write SF, and much more. And that's not all, folks! In the foreseable future, once the column has been established, I intend to open it up to you. Yes, you, the readers. I will be running a contest twice a year offering a prize (as yet undecided upon) and publication to that entry which best expresses an interesting and personal point of view on this peculiar field of ours. WAIT! STOP! Do NOT send anything yet. I'll tell you when—probably in the June issue.

In the meantime, you can all do me a big favor. Write to me. Tell me what you like and don't like to read. Tell me what offends you and what doesn't. Let me know how far you're willing to go for the sake of a wonderful story. I have, of course, a personal stake in all this. Of late, I've seen some wonderful stories which have, as a central part of their essence, perhaps some sex, perhaps some violence, perhaps some unpleasant material. I've been turning them down, so far, on the basis of what I think I know about you. But I'd like to know if I'm right in my assumptions. So, if you've ever wanted to help edit a science fiction magazine, here's your chance. As you can see from the late, and I guess, unlamented Profile, your voice does make a difference. ●

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SF CONVENTIONAL CALENDAR

by Erwin S. Strauss

I'm writing this just back from the Chicago WorldCon, where I got lots of news about upcoming social weekends with your favorite SF authors, editors, artists and fellow fans. For a longer, later list, an explanation of con(vention)s, and a sample of SF folksongs, send me an SASE (addressed, stamped envelope) at 9850 Fairfax Sq. #232, Fairfax VA 22031. (703) 273-6111 is the hot line. If a machine answers, leave your area code and number. I'll call back on my nickel. Send a #10 SASE when writing cons. For free listings, I need to know about your con six months ahead. Look for me at cons behind the Filthy Pierre badge.

FEBRUARY, 1983

18-21—**ConstellationCon.** For info, write: **Box 15-085, Cecil Blogg Dr., Victoria BC V9C 3H8, Canada.** Or phone **(604) 478-1952** (10 am to 10 pm only, not collect). Con will be held in: Victoria, BC (if city omitted, same as in address) at the Empress Hotel. Guests will include: Damon Knight, Kate Wilhelm, Larry Niven, Jerry Pournelle, David Gerrold, Bjo Trimble, Syd Mead.

18-20—**Boskone,** Park Plaza Hotel, Park Boston MA. Mack Reynolds, Wendy (Elfquest) Pini. A big one.

18-20—**Capricorn,** Radisson Hotel, Chicago IL. Masquerade, Mobius Theatre. No guests announced yet.

18-21—**AquaCon,** Red Lion Inn, Ontario CA. Jeanne ("Stardance") Robinson, artist George Barr, Spider ("Callahan's Crosstime Saloon") Robinson, fan Karen Willson. A good time to see California.

MARCH, 1983

4-6—**UpperSouthClave, c/o ConCave, 512 E. 12th, Bowling Green KY 42101.** Park City (resort) KY.

4-6—**WisCon, c-o SF3, Box 1624, Madison WI 53701.** Lee Killough, Marta Randall. Feminist emphasis.

11-13—**FilkCon, 1810 14th St. #101, Santa Monica CA 90404.** Fullerton CA. Passovoys. SF folksinging.

11-13—**WichaCon, 211 N. Oliver, Wichita KS 67208.** W. A. (Bob) Tucker, Gordon Garb, Stan Nevins.

17-20—**NorWesCon, Box 24207, Seattle WA 98124. (206) 723-2101.** Over one hundred writers.

18-20—**LunaCon, Box 149, Brooklyn NY 11204.** Hasbrouck Heights NJ (near New York NY). McCaffrey.

18-20—**Fantasy Worlds, Festival, c/o Waters, Box 72, Berkeley CA 94701.** Oakland CA. Octavia Butler, Katherine Kurtz, M. Z. Bradley, P. E. Zimmer, Ray Nelson, Diana L. Paxson.

24-27—**AggieCon, Box J-1, College Station TX 77844. (713) 845-1515.** Harry (Stainless Steel Rat) Harrison, Michael Whelan, W. A. (Bob) Tucker, Stephen Donaldson.

25-27—**Gemini, c/o Kennedy, 7907 Charlotte Dr. SW, Huntsville AL 35802.** Jack & Joe Haldeman, artists Kelly Freas & Kevin Ward, Charlie Williams. Masquerade, Hearts tournament.

SEPTEMBER, 1983

1-5—**ConStellation, Box 1046, Baltimore MD 21203.** John (Zanzibar) Brunner, David (Lensman) Kyle, Jack (Well of Souls) Chalker. The 1983 WorldCon. Go to smaller cons if you can to prepare. Join early and avoid rate hikes. Not connected with ConstellationCon in Canada shown above.

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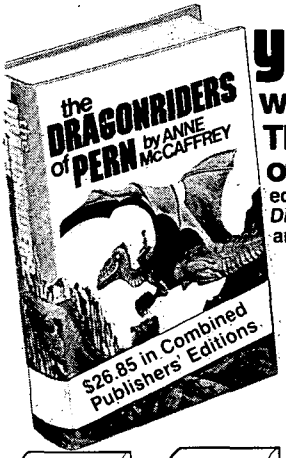

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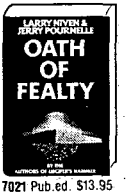

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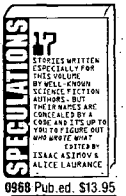

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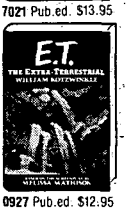

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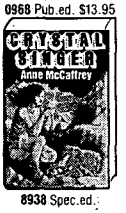

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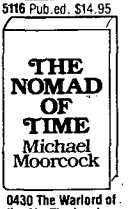

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About every 4 weeks (14 times a year), we'll send you the Club's bulletin, *Things to Come,* describing the 2 coming Selections and a variety of Alternate choices. In addition, up to 4 times a year you may receive offers of special Selections, always at low Club prices. If you want the 2 Selections, you need do *nothing; they'll be shipped automatically.*

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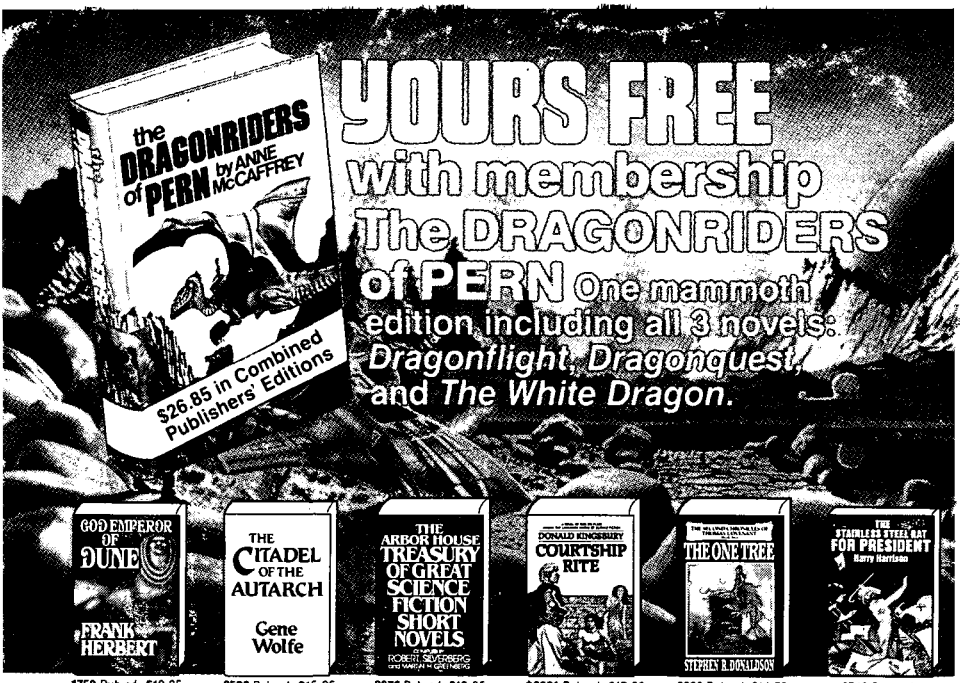
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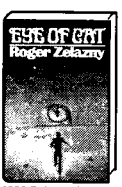

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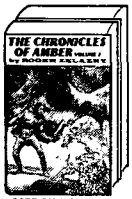

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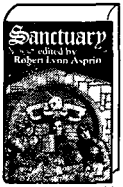

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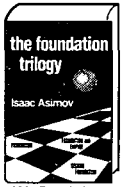

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